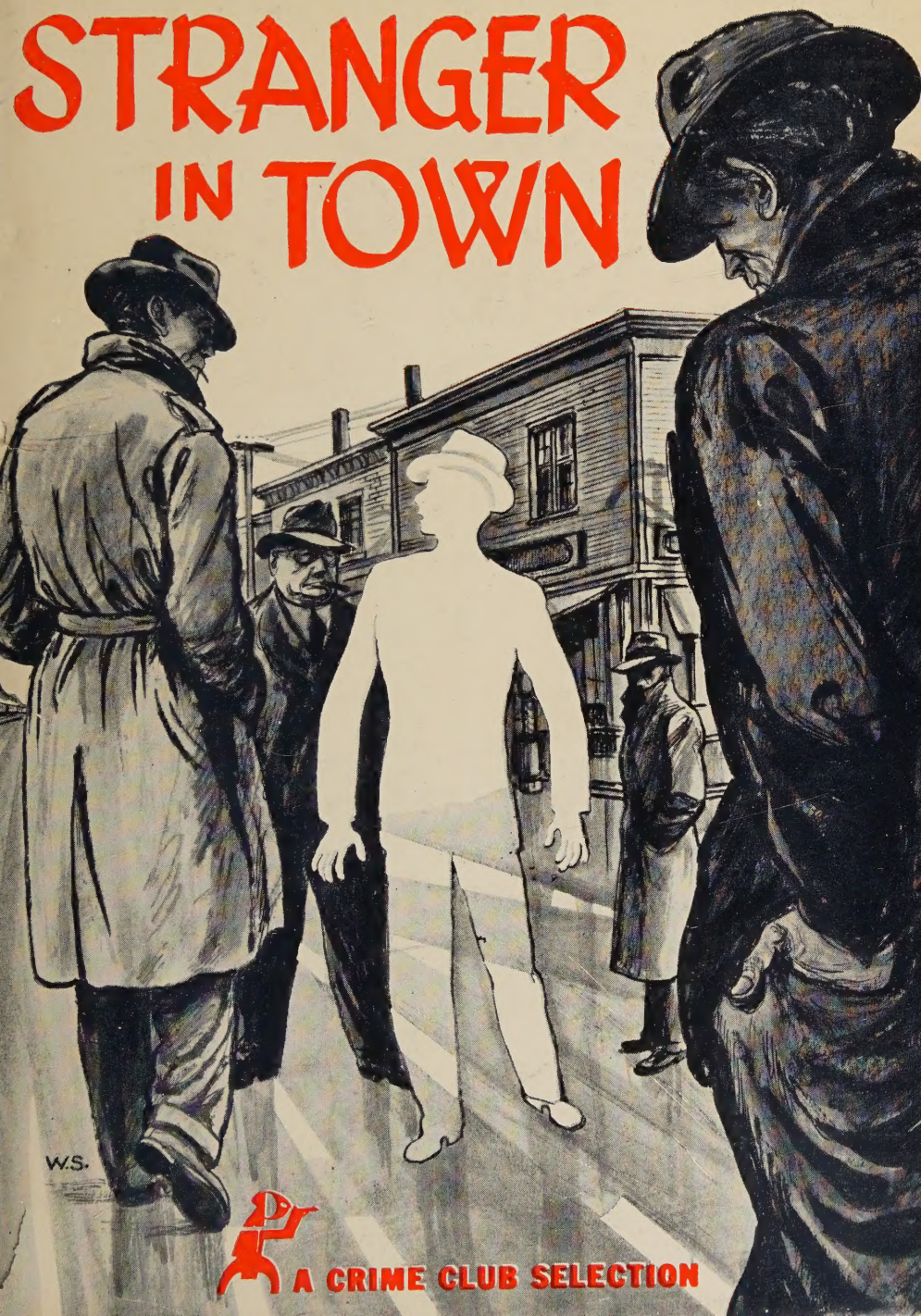


ROBERT BLOOMFIELD

STRANGER IN TOWN



W.S.



A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

STRANGER IN TOWN

by Robert Bloomfield

A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

LAKE TERESA was a town that was proud of its prejudices. Ross Nichols hated it, but he had come to find out why, nine months before, his brother had been killed and accused of a double murder in this ugly town. Like a modern Hamlet, he'd come to exorcise a ghost.

Ross was a stranger, but he'd had theater experience, and beautiful Karen James—drawn to the taciturn and sensitive man—offered him a job as director of the local playhouse. They were doing *Hamlet*. It was ironic. Under Ross's guidance, *Hamlet*, stripped of its pageantry, became a living, terrible tale of treachery and cruelty. And as Ross battled against the conspiracy of silence cloaking his brother's murder, Lake Teresa was stripped of its platitudes and bared in all its ugliness—with its rotten secrets and its entangling relationships which had caught even Karen in a net of duplicity that had led to three deaths. Suddenly Ross was no longer playing Hamlet. Another murder brought all the boiling violence of the town to the surface, and Ross found himself cast in that loneliest of all roles—the unwanted and suspected stranger in town.

Scene: Midwest.

This novel has not appeared in any form prior to book publication.



CHECK THIS SYMBOL
ON BACK OF JACKET

Jacket design by William Sharp

STRANGER IN TOWN

Books by Robert Bloomfield: STRANGER IN TOWN
VENGEANCE STREET
FROM THIS DEATH FORWARD
THE SHADOW OF GUILT

A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

LAKE TERESA was a town that was proud of its prejudices. Ross Nichols hated it, but he had come to find out why, nine months before, his brother had been killed and accused of a double murder in this ugly town. Like a modern Hamlet, he'd come to exorcise a ghost.

Ross was a stranger, but he'd had theater experience, and beautiful Karen James—drawn to the taciturn and sensitive man—offered him a job as director of the local playhouse. They were doing *Hamlet*. It was ironic. Under Ross's guidance, *Hamlet*, stripped of its pageantry, became a living, terrible tale of treachery and cruelty. And as Ross battled against the conspiracy of silence cloaking his brother's murder, Lake Teresa was stripped of its platitudes and bared in all its ugliness—with its rotten secrets and its entangling relationships which had caught even Karen in a net of duplicity that had led to three deaths. Suddenly Ross was no longer playing Hamlet. Another murder brought all the boiling violence of the town to the surface, and Ross found himself cast in that loneliest of all roles—the unwanted and suspected stranger in town.

This novel has not appeared in any form prior to book publication.

Scene: Midwest.



Some like them tough.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023

https://archive.org/details/bwb_O5-ODN-428

STRANGER ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ IN TOWN ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

BY ROBERT BLOOMFIELD



PUBLISHED FOR THE CRIME CLUB BY
DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK, 1953

ALL OF THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE FICTITIOUS AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 53-6629

COPYRIGHT, 1953, BY DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N.Y.

FIRST EDITION

STRANGER IN TOWN

AFTER puffing asthmatically around a black stand of timber, the train began to slacken speed on the long, curving slope approaching the station. I

From the mud-streaked windows Lake Teresa looked like an artist's palette. The town was a stippled blotch at its north end, while offshore, no more than a dab of brown paint on a lyre-shaped board, was a small, wooded island. East of the town were brown plowed fields, green pastureland, and red farm buildings whose windows reflected the setting sun in scattered bursts of flame. The sun gleamed with tawny brightness on the hills beyond the lake. Its slanting rays slashed an iridescent path across the quiet water. From the moving day coach the landscape seemed neat, tranquil, unexciting.

It was an incongruous setting for murder. All wrong, Ross thought, his hand straying to his chest, as if to touch the letter he carried in his wallet. It was hard to equate its green quietude with treachery, violence, sudden death.

But the letter made death official. Dated August 28 of the previous year, it bore a printed heading: *Police Department, Lake Teresa, Wisconsin*. By now he knew its contents by heart.

Dear Mrs. Vinson:

Pursuant to our telephone conversation of yesterday afternoon, this will confirm the details of the death of Charles Vinson at 10:58 A.M., August 27.

Your son, Charles Vinson, was shot in the line of duty when he attempted to run away from routine questioning by one of my men. In the investigation that followed it developed that said Charles Vinson had committed double homicide within the previous hour. His victims were Peggy and Alex Fuller, formerly of this municipality but residents of Greenridge at the time of their death.

I am ready to answer any questions that you see fit to ask, but my department's reconstruction of the crime proves that Charles Vinson's car collided with the Fullers' car on the road from Greenridge to Lake Teresa between 10 and 10:25 A.M. Alex Fuller was beaten and killed and left in his own car while his wife was then forced to accompany Vinson in Vinson's car. After an attempted assault she was then shot by Vinson sometime before 10:58, at which time, as already stated, he was shot by one of my men while trying to escape. The revolver responsible for Peggy Fuller's homicide belonged to Charles Vinson and was still in his car. Both cars bore evidence of the collision already noted. Alex Fuller's wallet was also found in Charles Vinson's car.

Your son's body, as per your request, will be shipped to your city for interment.

Very truly yours,
William C. Pollard
Chief of Police

Once again Ross saw his mother's face, crumpled with grief, its perennial ingenue's prettiness suddenly old and sagging, her eyes brimming with tears. "Ross, it can't be! I can't believe it!"

His hand gripped the back of the seat ahead of him, angrily,

vengefully. Then he realized MacFarland was watching him. He let his hand fall casually to his side. It was no time to let his emotions dominate him. His task demanded careful planning, objective thinking.

"Lake Teresa!"

As the train slowed, Ross stood up, bracing himself against the seat ahead of him before reaching for his suitcase on the overhead rack. Mac rose at the same time, moving into the aisle. Ross watched him pause to light a cigarette, his single bright gray eye narrowed against the upflare of the match in his cupped hands. As usual, Mac had his head cocked to one side to make adjustment to the distorted perspective caused by the empty eye socket behind the black silk patch scarring the left side of his face.

The train jolted to a halt. They were the only passengers to leave the near-empty coach. Burdened with suitcase and duffel bag, they swung down to the platform. The conductor waved to the engineer. The train groaned forward.

"Lake Teresa?" Mac said. "Some metropolis."

Except for an idle baggage truck, the station platform was empty. No one appeared as the train began to move again, northbound. A heraldic sign peeling its paint was nailed under the eaves. *Lake Teresa, Pop. 3502*. Vines climbed in green profusion along the clapboard sides.

"Hey, wait," Mac said. "Maybe we can pick up a Coke."

The waiting room was empty, but a telegraph key stuttered impersonally behind the grilled ticket window. The station agent looked up briefly, then bent over his desk again, face hidden under a green eyeshade, adding figures on a chart. Cryptic chalk marks announced train arrivals and departures on a smudged blackboard in the corner. Beside it was a soft-drink dispenser.

"Sure you don't want one of these, pal?"

"No, thanks. You're the pellagra-juice fan."

"S good for you. The caffein relaxes the innards."

"I don't need relaxing. I need recharging."

Ross moved away from the machine and halted at the dust-filmed window to look down the main street at the town's business section. The scene was still restful, untroubled, as though nothing had ever disturbed its peacefulness. Lake Teresa was the quietest of Wisconsin summer resorts, a long way from California, a longer way from Korea. He found himself envisioning its unhurried streets in the hush of summer twilight, the softball games in the vacant lots, the girls laughing secretly on the porch swings, the early-morning fishing from the drifting boats, the shooting in the autumn hills. He wished its tranquillity were real, not illusory. But the past was irretrievable. He had set himself an impossible task if he expected to cancel out his mother's anguished eyes, the still-incredulous grief contorting her tired face.

Mac dropped his emptied paper cup into a corner spittoon. "Ready, Nichols?"

It was a welcome interruption. "Any time, D. J."

Outside a new gray sedan came racing along the main street. As it skidded to a stop on the cindered parking area, its horn blasted an impatient summons. The station agent shuffled hurriedly outside to the platform.

"What's first on the agenda, son? Do we find a place to bunk or do we put on the feed bag first?"

Ross picked up his suitcase. "Let's eat."

When they went outside to the platform, the station agent was talking to a tall, big-shouldered man standing beside the new gray sedan. The newcomer was around Mac's age, about thirty. He wore an open-necked sports shirt and wrinkled slacks. A cigarette drooped from his mouth. He nodded occasionally, flat-nosed, his eyes slitted against the smoke. The station agent had handed him a green day-coach ticket.

The harsh discordance of a train whistle keened sharply around the bend. A southbound passenger local came into view, slowly passing the platform, puffing and snorting, hissing steam, like a mechanical dragon. It jolted loudly to a halt.

The man in the sports shirt turned and opened the sedan door, jerking his thumb at its unseen occupant.

"Hold it," Mac muttered. "Let's see what gives here."

A gray-haired Negro in torn overalls stepped onto the platform. He had a wrinkled, brown face under frosted gray hair. The man in the sports shirt handed him the day-coach ticket and then pushed him toward the train. The Negro stumbled, regained his balance, and then climbed with stiff dignity into the coach.

A moment later, puffing and snorting again, the train slowly moved away.

"I don't get it," Mac said. "Come on, Nichols."

Turning away, they crossed the cinders to the pavement leading to the main street. The train whistle shrilled, fading away in rushing diminuendo. Then the sedan raced past them, its motor needlessly loud, running in second gear at high speed. They watched its driver cut sharply around the corner at the first intersection.

"Pleasant citizen," Mac said. "The local reception committee, no doubt."

They walked a short business block past gift shops and haberdasheries before they found a restaurant. A red neon sign bloomed luridly in its window, harsh as metal scraping against metal in the failing light. The sign spelled out SAM'S INN. They opened the screen door on the darkened interior. A white marble counter gleamed with clammy dullness along the left wall; the booths along the opposite wall were empty. In the rear they saw four cardplayers huddled around a circular-topped table under a flyspecked, green-shaded globe.

No one looked up when the screen door slammed shut. Mac led the way to the counter, pushing his duffel bag under a stool. Ross followed suit with his valise. A fattish, balding man muttered hasty instructions to the other players and then came toward the counter, rubbing his hands on a once-white apron.

"Something for you, gents?"

They ordered hamburgers and coffee. The fattish man patted out

the ground meat on an electric griddle. Waiting, content to be silent, they glanced casually at the cardplayers. Then a door opened in the rear. The tall, broad-chested man from the station joined the group at the round-topped table. He was greeted by a burst of raucous, appreciative laughter. They watched him move forward with a swaggering gait.

"Where you been, Wad?"

"I had to get that black bastard on his way. I reckon he'll spread the good word about this burg when he gets back to Bronzeville. . . ." He took the chair the proprietor had vacated and then sat sprawled with legs wide, his big hands moving in elaborate, expressive pantomime. "Sonofabitch is lucky we got a fund to make sure his kind gets out of town. If I had my way, we wouldn't waste a nickel on 'em. . . ."

"Hell, Wad. You don't waste a nickel on anything."

"Sure, Wad. You sure know how to get yours."

"I admit it," the big man said smugly. "She's waitin' for me right now."

"Well, get goin', man!"

"Let the bitch wait," he said. "That's the way to treat 'em. Make 'em wait. Get 'em hot. She'll be plenty hot when we drive out to the cabin."

"She don't get hot for that husband of hers."

There was another burst of laughter from the assemblage. Someone brought out a bottle. It went the rounds. The man from the station gulped down his drink and wiped his hand across his loose mouth. He belched loudly as Ross and Mac started eating. The sound seemed to erupt from the depths of his shoes.

"Great," Mac said. "Finish up, pal."

When the fattish man rang up their checks, Mac reached across Ross and picked up several lumps of sugar from the porcelain bowl beside the cash register. He nibbled at one of the cubes while the proprietor counted out their change.

"So long, gents. Come back again sometime."

"Yeah," Mac said. "Be glad to."

Ross pushed open the screen door, his suitcase bumping against his knee. The June twilight was deepening into darkness. The first stars spangled the sky above the gentle contours of the surrounding hills. On the corner he turned abruptly, facing Mac with uncommon belligerence.

"What kind of place is this, for God's sake?"

"You know as much as I do, pal."

"Have they just switched the Mason-Dixon line through here?"

"Could be. I thought Cincy was bad enough. . . ." Mac put down the duffel bag and fingered the sugar cubes in his hands, matching them back to back, like dice. "Come on around back."

"What for?"

"A little something called retribution." Caustic humor flickered briefly in the single gray eye. "If that sedan's around in back, all I'll need is fifteen seconds. Let's go investigate, Nichols."

Ross followed his stocky, wide-shouldered figure around the building to a macadam parking area. The new gray sedan was parked to the left of the restaurant's rear door. While MacFarland walked over to it, Ross waited, scuffing the macadam with his toe, thinking of Chuck again, remembering his mother's unassuaged grief. The voices from the restaurant drifted out to him in a confused bubbling of sound. There was a break in the conversation behind the opened transom above the door. His body went tense in the growing dark. Then the lull was taken up by a shout of laughter. He relaxed, unconsciously sighing, aware of forgotten lines suddenly and inexplicably alive in his mind.

*In the most high and palmy state of Rome
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets . . .*

Then Mac was back at his side.

"Nothing to it, pal. A little sugar in the gas tank."

"You think it'll work?"

"You heard that slob." Mac ran blunt fingers through his coarse, tufted hair. "He's picking up his inamorata and taking her out to some cabin. They'll either be on their way to their little rendezvous or on their way back when that sugar stalls them for keeps. On their way home, I hope. I don't think his lovely's going to like being stranded in the country at three in the morning."

"It ought to blow up in his face."

"No use getting bloodthirsty, Nichols. You ought to know that by now." Mac led the way back to the main street. "Now let's find ourselves a place to flop."

Silently Ross lengthened his stride. His suitcase rubbed against his leg. For the first time in months he was walking along a highway without pack straps cutting into his shoulders. It still seemed strange to be walking unaccompanied by the cadence of marching feet, the creak and slap of leather, the glint of sun or full moon on rifle barrels. He wondered again how long it would take him to adjust to civilian amenities after his long months in uniform.

They moved briskly forward, toward the lights beginning to wink on in the darkness, like the firefly glimmer of distant gunfire in the Korean hills, equally unexplored and unknown, hiding the secret of murder.

WHEN they finished their breakfast in the malt shop near the Vista Motel, the sun was already warm, presaging the aggressive heat of noon. Main Street was clogged with cars, both parked and moving. Outside, lighting post-breakfast cigarettes, they found the sidewalks beginning to fill with Saturday-morning traffic, blocked by family

groups exchanging gossip and complaints about the cost of weekend shopping.

"Let's scout around," Mac said. "It wouldn't hurt to know the lay of the land."

They crossed Main Street during a lull in traffic and then skirted a diverse collection of baby carriages and coaster wagons outside a red-fronted food mart.

"A prolific community, pal."

"The winter nights are six months long in picturesque Lake Teresa."

They passed Smith's Shoe Store, the Selby Realty Company, Mitzi's Beauty Shoppe, Curley's Drug Store, the open door of a bowling alley whose interior resounded hollowly with spaced, muted cannonading. Traffic increased, on wheels and afoot. Giggling girls went past them. Mac practiced his ascending appraisal—first the legs, then the rich curve of breast and the final hope, surprise, reward of the smiling face. They went on, side-stepping the intermittent onslaught of small fry swarming everywhere on bicycles at breakneck speed.

In fifteen minutes of casual strolling they traversed the entire downtown section. Several blocks from the public beach, it was a typical small-town business district, duplicated throughout the Midwest, as though ordered by mail. They passed two drugstores, several groceries, the *Lake Teresa Gazette* building, the First National Bank, three boat dealers, two automobile salesrooms, and the Teresa Theater. The public library, the county courthouse and its adjoining fire station and lockup were on adjacent streets.

"Notice something about this hellhole?" Mac halted beside the revolving convolutions of a red-striped barber pole. "You realize we haven't seen a single Negro here?"

"That shouldn't surprise you after last night."

Mac scowled against the sun. "Well, yeah—but it's still funny. No Negroes."

"You might notice something else," Ross said. "This is the first non-Anglo-Saxon name I've seen."

In the store window to the right of the barbershop hung an unlighted neon sign: *Max Gershowitz, Cleaner and Tailor*. The whirling blades of an electric fan directed a steady breeze at a small American flag fluttering from a metal standard under the sign. A neatly lettered card leaned against the standard.

Mac leaned down to read the card. *American flag cleaned free with every garment cleaned*. Ross watched him rasp his thumb across his bristled cheek.

"Too bad we don't have a flag with us, son. How about settling for a shave instead? I'd sort of like to get prettied up for the week end."

"Go ahead. I can wait for you."

They found the barber sitting quietly in the rear barber chair. A thin, gray man in a dull white shirt and trousers, he held a gray cat on his fleshless thighs. Its plump furred back rose and fell under the gentle weight of his blue-veined hands. The cat jumped lazily to the floor when he lifted his hands.

Mac sat down in the front barber chair. The old man tied a clean towel about his neck and then adjusted the chair. The cat curled up in the corner, near a tarnished brass spittoon enthroned on a rubber mat. Ross sat in a wooden-backed chair against the wall, looking out the window at the passers-by.

"Make it a shave, Pop. Trim the top while you're at it."

"Fine, fine."

The old man slipped on a green eyeshade and took out his shears. He snipped tentatively at the coarse, tufted hair. It was tough and unruly, like a frayed hawser.

"You boys new in town?"

"Came in last night." Mac settled down in the chair. "Good fishing here?"

"None better. We got lake perch, rock bass, white crappie, sticklebacks, darters, some pike, sunfish."

"Sounds like a guy could relax around here."

"How come you want to relax? Been in the service?"

"We've been in," Mac said. "What's the record around here?"

"The Korean mess keeps takin' 'em." The knotted veins under the aged skin moved like little snakes when the old man gestured with his hands. "Arch Gilman, for instance. He's got a real bug in his ear. His handy man left him last night. Bein' inducted Monday. Cy figured he'd be rejected on account of his feet, but Doc James passed him, so in he goes."

"Arch Gilman?" Mac repeated. "What's he do?"

"Runs the Lakeside Hotel an' owns a passel of real estate round town." The old man spat neatly across the cat and into the spittoon. "I'd sure like to own a buck for every deal Arch Gilman's poked his finger in. He's a regular Jew for business when he ain't hittin' the bottle."

"Lake Teresa?" Ross murmured. "Lake Nausea . . ."

A British sports car went past the window, sleek and black, with a minimum of chrome trimming. It was the kind of car Doreen had always pointed out whenever they drove through Carmel.

"Whassat, young man?"

"My friend's got problems," Mac said. "He talks to himself."

"Hell, who don't nowadays? Tell me that, young feller. Who don't?"

"You've got a point there," Mac said. "What kind of town is this? You have any kind of colored population?"

"No, sir. Not Lake Teresa. This here's a white man's town. No colored, no Jews, no foreigners." The scissors snipped decisively. "'Ceptin' my neighbor next door, that is . . ."

"How you mean?"

"He's a foreigner. Come over here from Poland. But Gershowitz don't hurt nobody. Acts like a white man. He don't never get outa line."

Ross watched the passing traffic. "Does anybody ever get out of line here? You ever have any real trouble in town?"

"Depends on what you mean by trouble, son."

"Bank stick-ups," Mac said. "Rape, arson, mopery."

"We had ourselves a couple murders 'bout a year ago," the old man said complacently. "This place sure was poppin', let me tell you. We grabbed an' kilt the killer before we even knowed who was murdered. Match that one up for trouble."

Unable to speak, abruptly picturing Chuck lying dead, Ross looked at Mac in the barber chair. But there was no need for Mac to take up the questioning. The old man was more than ready to discuss Lake Teresa's claim to fame.

"Happened last August," he said. "A Monday mornin', it was, an' quieter than Billy-be-damned. A young couple used to live here, Peggy an' Alex Fuller, married no more'n a month, started to drive here from Greenridge, 'bout twenty miles from here. Never did get to town. Alive, that is. 'Bout two thirds of the way here young Alex Fuller got hisself beaten to death, an' his bride got herself kidnaped an' shot dead. Some young punk from California did it. He was passin' through an' held 'em both up. Didn't get very far after he done it. Ran outa gas an' then got hisself shot. He made a dash for it when he got stopped for questionin' an' got hisself mowed down in his tracks. The whole shishmaboogie was over in less'n an hour."

"Must've made a big splash here," Mac commented.

"Sure did. Folks talked about it all winter. Nothin' like it ever happened before, an' it sure ain't happened since. That little girl wasn't even twenty, an' Alex wasn't much older. In the springtime of life, you might say. It was a real tragedy, let me tell you."

When they left the shop, Mac had the indefinably naked look of a man with whom a barber has had his way. His hair was plastered back in a flat pompadour, like molded papier-mâché above the pork-white area of his shaved neck. On the street the hair tonic the old man had applied to his scalp attained full strength in the heat of the sun. He grinned ruefully at Ross and ran his fingers through his neat, wet hair.

"Well, now to see Arch Gilman," he said. "We're likely to be here for some time, pal. I might as well earn a buck or two in the process."

"You mean you're going after that handy man's job?"

"Why not? You can pick up a slew of information around a hotel." The bright, caustic eye lighted with friendly derision. "Don't look so dubious, Nichols. I'm not out to homestead here. But a job might help both of us. . . ." He ran his hand through his hair again, leaving it in irremediable disarray. "Let's go see Mr. Arch Gilman. Maybe we're just the man he's looking for."

The Lakeside Hotel was west of the public beach, big and rambling, of white clapboarding in need of new paint, with faded green shutters and rusticated cupolas and bay windows. Wicker rocking chairs and settees were set out on the wide veranda encircling the structure, but no one sat in them. There was no sign of life on the threadbare lawn fronting the hotel, and there was no one on duty behind the reception desk. The lobby was grimly furnished with more wickerwork of uncertain vintage, a battered upright piano, a bamboo table covered with ancient magazines. Double doors opened on the empty dining room. The lake shone satin-smooth beyond its uncurtained windows.

Mac clapped his hand against the desk bell on the ink-stained writing pad. Its flat unmusical tones sounded feebly in the stillness. No one answered. He rang again. The door beside the mail rack finally opened as he withheld his hand in mid-air, looking at a thin, sharp-faced brunette in a white starched smock.

"Yes?" She appeared to be in her middle thirties, though her thick dark hair was streaked with gray. Despite the clinical whiteness of her smock, she seemed one step removed from slatternliness. The impression defied analysis, centering around her rouged, discontented mouth and the unsmiling lines about her cold, unwavering eyes. "What can I do for you?"

"Arch around?" Mac asked affably. "We'd like to see him."

"He's out back somewheres." Her hazel eyes seemed flecked with green, at once opaque and murky. "I'll go get him."

"Don't bother. We can go out to him."

She eyed them with an equivocal distrust. Her hostility seemed almost impersonal, as though she harbored a blanket suspicion of all men. It lasted only an instant. Then her face resumed its aloof, lackadaisical coldness. Only her voice betrayed her chronic disaffection.

"You'll find him out back. He's out on the pier."

Ross felt her looking at him as they passed her. They walked down the hall and opened the screen door on the back porch. A flagstone walk extended across the lawn to a wooden pier which stretched into the water and culminated in a wooden rotunda. A launch was tied up midway down the pier, rocking gently in the easy swell and ebb of the water. A heavy-set man in brown slacks and a dirty yellow jersey was crouched in the boat, working over the engine. Ross followed Mac along the pier, looking past the masts and spars along the shore line toward the small, wooded island he had seen from the train window.

The man in the boat still worked doggedly at the engine after they came to a halt and stood looking down at him.

Mac cleared his throat. "Arch Gilman?"

"Yeah?" When Gilman looked up, he revealed the face of a steady drinker. His mouth was slack and weak under a fleshy nose; tiny broken veins in his cheeks gave him the habitual toper's false glow of ruddy health. He was a pulpy man. His brown hair was limp with sweat, clinging in wet fronds to his narrow brow. "Whatcha want?"

"D. J. MacFarland's my name," Mac said amiably. "This is Ross Nichols." He went on equably as Gilman grunted. "We understand you're in the market for a handy man, Arch. We figured we might do a job for you."

"Don't have enough work for two." Gilman glanced at Ross. "Can you handle tools? Know anything about motors?"

Ross shook his head. "Not too much."

"Well, no use wasting time. Can't use you."

It was a flat dismissal. Gilman picked up a wrench and started working on the engine again. The wrench slipped. He scraped his knuckles against the frame. The mishap inspired vehement profanity.

Mac bent toward him. "Having trouble?"

"Yeah." Gilman tried the starter. The motor spluttered unhappily and stopped. "Sonofagun . . ."

"Mind if I look at it?"

"Won't do any good. Damn thing won't start."

"You can't tell. Carburetor sounded clogged to me. Let me give it a fast once-over."

Gilman seemed about to protest, then changed his mind. "Okay. I'm ready to sink the goddamned thing."

Crouching down, supporting his weight with one hand on the pier, Mac let himself into the launch. He examined the exposed motor with a critical eye. Then his hands moved among the bewildering array of engine parts with their customary sureness and efficiency. At last he straightened and started the motor. He grinned as it roared and settled into a steady rhythm.

Gilman stared at him, unsmiling, listening to the running motor. Then he bent down and cut the ignition switch. He waited several seconds and started the engine again. It settled down to a series of steady, muffled detonations before he cut the switch a second time.

"That satisfy you, Arch? When do I start work?"

"Come inside. My wife'll tell you what she wants fixed in the kitchen."

They walked back to the lobby.

"How's business, Arch?"

"Business don't start in a big way for another week," said Gilman. "We got plenty to do."

The woman in the white smock still stood behind the reception desk. She was folding a man's blue serge suit over a huge American

flag draped over the counter. She looked up with the disinterest she had bestowed on them when they first entered.

"We got somebody to take Cy's place," announced Gilman. "You can give him the dope on what's wrong with the refrigerator and the rest of the crap in the kitchen."

Again Ross felt the graying brunette look at him. Her expression was blank, unfathomable. Then Mac grinned at her. She turned her eyes away, her face empty, looking at her husband.

"When does he start?"

Gilman nodded at Mac. "Tomorrow?"

"Can do," said Mac. "What's the stipend?"

"Thirty-five a week and found. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it."

"Okay." The flabby-faced man looked at his wife. "LaVerne, get Slop to fix a room up for him when he comes in. I'm goin' over to Gershowitz's now." He picked up the suit and the flag. "This everything?"

"It's all you asked for. You want him to have Cy's room?"

"Yeah. I'll be back in half an hour."

Arch Gilman went outside. The screen door slammed behind him. His wife shrugged almost imperceptibly and then opened the desk register to the last page.

"Sign here. I'll need your social-security number too."

"MacFarland's the name." Mac dipped the pen in the inkwell. "This is Mr. Nichols."

LaVerne Gilman ignored the introduction. Mac lay the pen on the blotter and pushed the register toward her. She looked at his name with deliberate unconcern.

"Any particular time you want me to start in the morning?"

"Around seven-thirty," she said. "Or don't you like to get up early?"

"It all depends," Mac said. "Depends on who nudges me out of bed." Under his rumpled hair his amiable gargoyle face was immobile, expressionless as a totem-pole effigy. "You can tell me about

the refrigerator tomorrow." Turning away from the counter, he took Ross by the arm. "Okay, Homer. You can take me back to the poor farm now."

They crossed the veranda and went down the wide wooden steps in silence.

"Don't bother to tell me, pal," Mac said abruptly. "She's a bitch. But I've met her kind before. I know her type like a book."

"I wasn't thinking of her."

"I was," Mac said. "Maybe that's my trouble. She's the only type I know."

3

THE church bells reverberated in a vast, remote clamor while Ross rented his bicycle from the Playtime Shop near the public beach. It was after ten, but still too early for many swimmers to be out. With MacFarland already working, the long Sunday had to be filled in some fashion. Without a car, a rented bicycle was the only means of reconnaissance. The bells still rang out across the trees when Ross headed west, past the Lakeside Hotel and the lake, away from the business section.

Along the residential streets he pedaled under cottonwoods and catalpas towering overhead in close array, reminiscent of the eucalyptus windbreaks he knew so well. Seedlings from the molting cottonwoods lay white in the gutters, blowing lightly as soft snow across the pavement. The rich fragrance of lilac and honeysuckle came to him from the foliage screening the rigid lines of walls and eaves. Well-being and comfort seemed to be a commonplace to people who could lavish such obvious care on the irises and tulips set out like nodding lanterns in the black-dirted flower beds.

Beyond the hotel he followed the curve of the lake. The gun-

metal water shone and sparkled in the morning sun. A few sails skimmed lightly over the water, near the island and close to the farthest shore. He pedaled slowly and easily, favoring his knee, sensitive to the unpredictability of the floating cartilage behind his mended kneecap. Along the green sloping banks of the unruffled water were numerous cottages and villas. From their landscaped grounds steps descended to the boathouses and piers where power launches and racing sloops rode gently at their moorings. Highway markers pointed the way to the towns of Greenridge and Waunona. He finally stopped on a grassy knoll overlooking a brief stretch of beach and then shielded his eyes against the reflected glare to survey the pleasant, tranquil landscape.

For a moment, listening to a yellow warbler in a nearby maple, he almost forgot the reason for his tour of inspection. Then he thought of his mother's grief back in Monterey. He remembered the Negro on the station platform on Friday night, the remarks in the barbershop on Saturday morning. His throat tightened in a spasm of disgust. He was no longer conscious of the warbler, the colored sails on the lake, the humming of bees amid the roadside columbine.

Only the letter in his wallet mattered.

August 27, he thought.

He had been six thousand miles and more away when it happened. On the August day when his brother had been killed he had been pinned down for hours by mortar fire thirty miles north of Seoul, thinking about Doreen and their ruined marriage, thankful Chuck was safe at home. He hadn't known his brother was dead until his knee wound brought him home eight months later.

"But—but, Mom—" The news had hit him hard. "I thought Chuck was still back east. We're none of us good correspondents, God knows, so when you didn't mention him, I thought he was still back in Ohio or Indiana, still talking about getting enough money together to marry that girl he met in Indianapolis or Cleveland."

"I couldn't write," his mother said somberly. "I couldn't tell you,

son." She gripped his hand. "Ask Mac about him. Mac was the last one to see him."

In the old days, back in Monterey, MacFarland had been the older kid next door. He knew about their mother's various marriages, and he knew the sense of instability and impermanence which had inspired their wanderlust. His own tendency to roam had started early in life. He came from a family of thirteen sired by a father in and out of jail for drunkenness, wife-beating, and non-support. While Ross was working his way through Stanford and Chuck was still in high school after a fashion, MacFarland was already seeing the country. His civilian years had been spent as a harvest hand in Kansas and Minnesota, as a rougher in Pittsburgh steel mills, a vacuum-cleaner salesman in Michigan, a garage mechanic in a half dozen states.

"What do you think really happened, Mac?" By that time Ross had gone to Chicago, stopping to see MacFarland before he went on to Lake Teresa. "How could Chuck get into a mess like that? My God, I could believe it of anyone except Chuck!"

"I wouldn't want to say, pal. I'd hate to start guessing." MacFarland had seen Chuck only two days before Chuck was killed. He had been working in Cincinnati at the time, exempt from further military service, thanks to the eye he had lost at Cassino. Chuck, too, had been draft-exempt. Surgery for infant glaucoma had left his vision permanently impaired. He had stopped to see Mac on his way from Knoxville to Monterey. "He wanted to get home for a little while. He hadn't seen your mother since you shipped out to Korea."

"Why would he go from Tennessee to California by way of Wisconsin?"

"I think he wanted to visit some babe or other up in Minnesota. He'd met her in Indiana originally, but her family had moved back to Duluth or somewhere. I never did know how she reacted to what happened to him."

"She's probably married," Ross said, thinking of Doreen. "He

was only a kid, anyway. He had plenty of time to think about settling down."

Chuck had been twenty when he was killed. A difference of six years had separated the two brothers, and marriage and an unexpected war had enlarged the separation for Ross. Chuck had wandered pretty much on his own, even before Ross married Doreen. Ironically, he had developed his itching foot when their mother had finally decided to settle down after her fifth divorce. But wanderlust was one thing. Murder was something else again. Chuck was incapable of murder. Chuck was incapable of violence in any form.

"Can't you give me any lead at all, Mac? Didn't you see anything about the case in the papers?"

"I wasn't reading the press those days, Nichols. I got myself involved with a Delilah who took up all my time the minute I got off the job every day. It only lasted a month, but it sure kept me out of circulation."

"Congratulations. It should happen to me."

"Pal, I wouldn't wish that babe on my worst enemy. I had to skip town to ditch her. I came here to Chi in September. I've been here ever since."

"Well, Chuck didn't kill anybody," Ross said stubbornly. "This Pollard thinks it was all wrapped up nine months ago, but I won't be satisfied until I find out the truth."

Nine months, he thought again. Nine months.

It took nine months to bring new life into the world—as he had learned with Doreen. Overseas he had tried to forget her. Back home, met with the news about Chuck, he had still brooded about her, though she had married again and had moved away to Texas. For some people it took more than nine months to forget a marriage that had failed—or to wipe out the memory of death.

In Monterey, listening to his mother, he had known the sensible course to follow was to forget the past and get back into the swing of things. His efforts to carve out a career for himself had been

frustrated by the draft. Now he had signed his own personal armistice; he was ready to start work again. But his bitterness over Doreen and his refusal to accept Chuck's execution as a murderer prevented any kind of immediate readjustment. Both had been responsible for his decision about Chuck. He had told himself he wanted to cancel out his mother's sense of shame and dazed disbelief, but other factors were involved. It was a question of justice intermingled with revenge, of striking back at Doreen by disproving accepted truth.

"I'll come with you, pal," Mac said in Chicago. "I'm ready to move again, and two heads can do more than one in a case like this."

Now, nine months after the fact, they were on the scene. Now they had to find out exactly what had happened on that twenty-seventh day of August. They had to learn what they could about the Fullers. They had to trace all the relationships which had brought death to Peggy and Alex Fuller at the hands of someone unsuspected, undiscovered. The prospect was bleak, unpromising, but the job had to be done before they could go to William Pollard and demand official restitution. The letter from Pollard indicated the police chief was the last man they could expect to help them. Pollard was certain to resist any attempt to reopen a case he had considered solved from the beginning.

Or was Pollard right? Was Chuck actually guilty?

It was an impossible alternative, outrageous, unthinkable. What could the truth be? Only that Chuck had been made a scapegoat. He wasn't the first stranger to be victimized by a community hostile to strangers. He had been framed. It was the only conceivable hypothesis.

Within the next half hour the barber's remarks on Saturday morning took on full meaning. The area southwest of the lake was given over to new subdivisions. Selby Realty Company billboards exploited them on prominent slopes and knolls. *Build in Sunnycrest! Life Is Sunnier in Sunnycrest!* Set among the new houses

and unfinished structures were smaller signs—*Restricted . . . Exclusive*—one after the other, like a procession of silent sneers.

In the next mile the housing developments were succeeded by open fields and wooded ground, with dogwood trees in bloom along the roadside. Then the highway veered sharply away from the lake. Braking to a stop on the curve, Ross looked down at a high wire fence blocking the road's logical route along the shore line. Substantial strands of barbed wire crowned the fence, completing an effective barrier against all trespassers. Cedars and pines grew in profusion beyond the fence. A shingled roof gleamed red among the green foliage, but the house itself was hidden by the dense screen of trees. A wooden pier extended into the water. A sleek, expensive launch rocked lazily beside it. On either side of the pier, fringing the shore, weeping willows dipped low over bulrushes and blue iris.

All at once a Doberman pinscher emerged from the woods and ran along the grass inside the fence. The animal was lean, savage-looking; its red-rust markings glinted like copper in the sun. It seemed to harmonize perfectly with the *Restricted* signs in Sunny Sunnycrest. Ross heard the dog bark. Then it loped toward a curving driveway leading from the trees to a locked gate opening on the highway below him. A small black convertible emerged from the trees. It was the British sports car he had seen go by the barber-shop on Main Street. The driver seemed big and powerful, between thirty and forty, with an air of assurance close to arrogance. The car turned onto the highway and shot away toward the west at high speed. The dog barked again and then returned to the cover of the trees.

An hour later, riding in the opposite direction, passing the Lakeside Hotel for a second time, Ross decreased his pace. The constant jackknifing of his legs had brought on a dull, gnawing pain in his left knee. The doctors had warned him to respect the danger signal; the floating cartilage could lay him up for weeks at a time. He coasted past the cylindrical whiteness of Al's Lighthouse Diner on

the highway, then slowed, ready to stop and rest. His eyes went up a gentle slope on the right side of the road, arrested by a rambling structure overlooking the lake. It was a shuttered playhouse—a renovated barn, with red sides and silvered roof and white window trim. He came to an abrupt halt.

For the first time since his arrival in Lake Teresa he had found something that aroused his interest in a positive way.

Halfway up the flagstone steps leading to the shuttered building, taking his time about the climb, still favoring his knee, he stopped to watch a silver-gray convertible speeding along the highway. It came to a quick stop below him. He watched the girl behind the wheel step down to the road and then come briskly up the steps, not looking at him, seemingly unaware he was there.

She was a tall girl, honey-haired, wide-shouldered, slim-hipped, in a white blouse and golden-yellow skirt. She carried the kind of burlap bag used for holding knitting paraphernalia. She looked up with a smile as she reached him.

"Oh, hello!" Her voice had a cool quality, with a certain shyness in it, like the shyness of a well-behaved child. Her eyes were a deep, luminous blue, accenting her small nose and wide mouth. "Would you like to look inside our playhouse?"

"It seems a little hard to do. . . ." He indicated the shuttered windows and boarded door. "Sort of a problem in illegal entry . . ."

She laughed. "We'll soon take care of that." She produced a hammer from the bag hanging from her arm. "I've been carrying this around for three days now. I knew I'd use it sometime."

"May I help?"

After he had pried the boards away from the doorway, she took a metal key ring crowded with jangling keys from the burlap bag and tried one of them in the lock. Her hands were small and shapely, the nails short and unlacquered. He decided she wasn't much more than twenty.

"Thank you. . . ." After opening the door she turned back to

him, smiling. "I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Karen James. I only came up because I noticed you here."

"My name's Nichols. Ross Nichols."

"How do you do, Mr. Nichols?" Her smile mirrored her voice, slow and whimsical, appearing first in her eyes, then spreading invisibly to her mouth, tugging the corners upward, reminding him again of the controlled shyness of a well-mannered child. "Welcome to the Lake Teresa Playhouse." Taking a flashlight from her bag, she poked its inquisitive beam inside the dark interior. "The electricity hasn't been turned on yet. We'll have to take off one of those shutters if you'd really like to see inside."

Ross took the hammer from her and went to work on the middle window. Sunlight streamed into the auditorium in a dazzling rectangular beam when he returned to her. The interior came into sharper focus, in zones of light and shadow.

"Nice," he said approvingly. "Very nice."

Karen James seemed pleased. "We like it."

"When does your season open?"

"We thought we were going to open two weeks from tonight."

"Complications?"

"Our director for the last three years started readings last week. Then Hugh threw a tantrum last Wednesday and flung himself off to New York without warning. We've tried to struggle along without him, but we haven't struggled very far."

"What plays were you going to do?"

She smiled. "Believe it or not, we were going to start with *Hamlet*."

"In a summer theater?"

"That's what Hugh wanted to do, and our board chairman backed him up. Hugh planned to do it in modern dress."

"Well, I don't blame him. I would, too, if I had the chance."

Her blue eyes appraised him with new interest. "Would you?"

He hedged quickly. "Depending upon the talent, of course."

"It's local in our case, with a few summer visitors for some of

the parts." She was still looking at him, curious, interested. "Have you worked in the theater, Mr. Nichols?"

"I started out that way at Stanford and then at Pasadena Playhouse. Afterward I did some local radio and TV stuff in Hollywood. Then the draft and Korea got me. It's not much of a record, but I can't help feeling interested in *Hamlet*. One of the few books I had in Korea was a pocket edition of the tragedies. I learned *Hamlet* and *Othello* line by line, like 'Stardust.'"

"Would you be interested in doing *Hamlet* for us?"

It was absurd, and yet he felt a quickening of interest. He told himself he had come to Lake Teresa for only one purpose. But the thought of working in any kind of theater revived his old energies and ambitions.

"You're taking a lot for granted," he said. "How do you know I'd work out?"

"Call it intuition."

"Is the decision solely up to you?"

"Well, no," she admitted reluctantly. "I'm only one of the directors. I'd have to call a meeting and get the others' consent. We could easily do that by tomorrow night." She locked the door and dropped the key ring into her bag. "If I get the board to consider you, will you take the job? I'm not sure what we could pay you. Maybe a hundred per play, plus room and board. If you're not planning to do anything immediately—well, it might be sort of a vacation for you."

"I don't know. I just arrived Friday night with a friend. He's already got himself a job, but we haven't decided how long we're going to stay."

"Talk to your friend about it." They went down the flagstoned steps. "Where are you staying?"

"The Vista Motel."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Or would you rather call me? I'm Dr. James's daughter. You can reach me at 217-J."

Ross stared thoughtfully after the convertible as it disappeared

under the trees arching over the road. Then he straightened the bicycle and started toward the Lakeside Hotel. Karen James was attractive, no question about it. But even to consider her offer was out of the question. He had to be free to conduct his investigation into the events of last August.

At the hotel he found Mac working behind the reception desk. No one else was in the lobby. A few people were eating in the dining room. He made an impersonal, factual report while Mac lounged against the counter.

"Sounds okay, pal. Looks like you stumbled into something."

"What?"

"Between the two of us, we can cover this town like a blanket. What I don't find out here you can dig up among the playhouse gentry."

"Make sense, will you? Where's the connection between Chuck and staging a straw-hat *Hamlet*?"

"You know who that beefy character was Friday night?"

"The one who put the Negro on the train?"

"In person," Mac said. "His name's Wad Brown." A new grimness came to the impregnable façade of his splayed nose and jutting jaw and black eye patch. "Brown's second-in-command of the local gestapo. He's the one who shot Chuck on grounds of resisting arrest."

Ross felt his pulse quicken. "How do you know?"

"I've already made friends with one of the waitresses. According to Hazel, the Gilman wench got in late Friday night, tired and mad. About half an hour ago I walked in on a telephone conversation that had Madam Gilman sounding very much annoyed with somebody named Wad."

"You mean she was out with Brown on Friday night?"

"That's my deduction, son. I figure LaVerne's been sleeping with him, and now he's running into heavy weather on account of his car breaking down Friday night. I also figure I can find out just

so much about Brown here. You can find out the rest at the playhouse."

Ross shook his head. "I don't see it. I wouldn't have time for anything else."

"Let me tell you something else, Nichols. Martha Selby and Nina Blair are high-muck-a-mucks in the playhouse setup. The Selby dame is Peggy Fuller's mother. Nina Blair's the young guy's sister."

Russ frowned thoughtfully. "That's different. . . ."

"I'll say it's different." Mac straightened as a middle-aged couple left the dining room for the lobby. "Now blow, pal. Get on the phone and tell that babe you'll take the job."

4
WHEN the clock in the hall began striking eight, the first quavering note startled Karen in the midst of rearranging the blue squills and sweet William on the mantel. Then the doorbell rang, a shrill octave higher. She crossed into the hall, her hands lifted to her head in a last-minute appraisal of braided hair and white blouse in the Venetian wall mirror her mother had loved while she was alive.

"Karen, honey!" Nina Blair stood on the step. She turned briefly to wave at a car pulling away under the cottonwoods. "That's Daddy Blair. Julian's baby-sitting. I told him you'd drive me home."

"Why, of course, Nina. Come on in."

Nina moved gingerly through the hall into the living room. Small and blond, she was charged with gaiety as a wire might be charged with electricity. But her galvanic restlessness was blunted and slowed down by the awkward cautiousness necessitated by the last months of pregnancy. She had the face of a mischievous choirboy above her swollen body.

"Me and my load," she complained cheerfully, sitting down.

"Every time I squat or get up I feel like I'm carrying a ton of coal in my apron." Automatically she reached for the cigarettes on the table beside her chair, then halted her hand in mid-air. "There I go! Your father tells me I mustn't smoke, and I still put away a pack a day." Then she changed her mind again and shook a cigarette from the opened package. "Oh well. I smoked with the other two, and it didn't hurt them. Just don't tell the good doctor I said so."

Karen laughed. "It's a promise." She struck a match for the up-tilted cigarette. "How's your brood these days?"

"Cissie's still maltreating the language, and Buzzie's still bruising new parts of his anatomy. The child has so many bruises you'd swear he was held together by vulcanized rubber patches." Nina blew smoke ceilingward. "Their father, poor oaf, still gets ink on his shirt collar down at the *Gazette*. Why on his collar, Lord only knows. I keep telling him the average man uses a blotter, but Julie says he isn't average, just Cro-Magnon." A saucy red bow bobbed on top of her head as she patted the blond curls at the back of her neck. "What did Martha say when you called this meeting?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. She said she'd be here."

"You know, honey, I still can't believe I was ever related to her. Or maybe I wasn't. She was Alex's mother-in-law, but I don't suppose that actually brought me into the fold."

The doorbell rang in the hall, crisply, peremptorily, with a brusqueness that grated on the ear.

"Speak of the devil," said Nina. "Show the old witch in, honey. That's her ring."

Karen went into the hall with an odd reluctance, disturbed by Nina's casual reference to Alex. Her reaction annoyed her. Alex was dead. He had been dead for over nine months. But was her aversion solely because of Alex? Hadn't she always disliked meeting Martha Selby? The bell rasped again. She moved slowly forward and opened the door.

"My dear!" said Dudley Fortune.

"Hi, Karen," said Lloyd Mowrer.

The two men flanked Martha Selby, who stood silent on the threshold, expensively and badly garbed in a bold floral print dress, with untidy brown hair threatening to escape from under a floppy picture hat. Karen stood aside while they came into the hall. The two men followed Martha Selby with the abashed air of lap dogs entering a strange house.

Nina sent up a welcoming smile when they entered the living room. "Hi!"

"I do hope we're not late, girls," Dudley Fortune said flutily. "I was detained at the shop, but Martha and Lloyd insisted on waiting for me."

"Don't give it another thought," said Nina. "We're ready to get down to business when you are."

Karen waited while Martha Selby took her place on the divan and the two men found their favorite chairs. Lloyd Mowrer began doodling with the pencil and paper she had set out for him. The attorney was a heavy man in a rumpled blue suit and wrinkled white shirt. His florid complexion was in direct contrast to Dudley Fortune's pallid blandness. Dudley was a florist and a bachelor, crowding forty, with a kind of prim unwillingness about growing older. Karen glanced at Nina and then smiled back at her as Dudley opened the discussion.

"Well, girls, now we're here, I'll have to admit Lloyd and myself feel pretty vague about all this. As chairman, Martha, I feel perhaps you might enlighten us."

Martha Selby reared back on the divan with angular majesty, thin and loose-mouthed, with full brown eyes whose abnormally large irises surrounded shrunken pupils.

"Thank you, Dudley. First of all, I'm still shattered by Hugh's behavior. I've tried to reach him via long distance, but he seems to have vanished off the face of the earth. Secondly, I don't see how anyone can possibly replace him, and with the season scheduled to open in less than two weeks—"

"Relax, Martha," Nina said dryly. "You already know Karen's found somebody." She reached for the cigarettes again, then pushed the package away from her, out of temptation. "Tell us about him, honey. Is it true he's the illegitimate grandson of George Bernard Shaw?"

The moment they settled back expectantly Karen knew why she had been nervous. In sudden panic she realized she knew almost nothing about Ross Nichols except his name. She wondered how she could have been so blithely confident when she talked to him. Desperation seized her. With it came a certain defiance. Miraculously it gave her an unsuspected glibness about his stage, radio, and television experience in Hollywood. At last she ~~reached~~ the limits of her inventive powers and abruptly sat down.

"Sounds all right to me," Nina Blair said promptly. "How about the rest of you?"

Lloyd Mowrer and Dudley Fortune looked covertly to Martha Selby for guidance.

"Well, the young man sounds extremely capable, and I'm sure if he can measure up to Karen's description we'll be quite fortunate," she said. "Nevertheless, I feel the committee ought to examine the candidate before we come to any decision."

Karen calmly returned her gaze. "As a matter of fact, I called Mr. Nichols and asked him to come this evening to answer any questions you might care to put to him."

She avoided looking at Nina, knowing the impish grin she could expect from that quarter. She listened to the others talk about production costs and advertising outlays and Hugh Fenwick's mysterious behavior while she waited for the doorbell to ring.

When she faced him at last on the step, Ross Nichols seemed thinner than she had remembered him. He was five or six years older than Alex, and yet his manner reminded her of Alex's quiet gentleness. His nose was thin and long; his eyes were a darker blue than her own. She wondered again about the wounds or illness

responsible for his discharge. He was bareheaded, in slacks and an odd jacket.

After she led him into the living room, she was uncomfortably aware of a strange blend of reactions. Hostility, approval, and doubt combined in a cross fire of unvoiced attitudes. She made hurried introductions, annoyed at herself for being rattled. Then she watched him stand with his back against the mantel while all the information she had already given them was sought from him all over again.

At times, when the inquiry touched upon the more ambitious highlights of the dossier she had improvised for him, Ross Nichols looked at her with quizzical eyes. She avoided his glance. He was forced to parry the unexpected questions without any help. He answered his questioners deftly rather than evasively. His adroitness brought her confidence back to her.

"What are we wasting time for?" Nina demanded at last. "Why don't we hire the man and get it over with?"

At last they reached an agreement. He was to produce the season's first play. Tenure for the season was to depend upon the reception given his first production. He agreed to accept a hundred dollars and living expenses for his work on *Hamlet*. As Martha Selby pointed out, Hugh Fenwick had already done the important spadework. The board could hardly be expected to pay the full fee for less than two weeks' work.

"How about those living expenses?" asked Nina. "Where will Mr. Nichols stay?"

Dudley Fortune lived with his mother in a ten-room house near Sunnycrest. The Mowrers were childless, with several rooms to spare in their lakeside house. Neither man spoke. Nina glanced mischievously at Martha Selby.

"Wasn't Hugh going to stay with you, Martha?"

"It was only a tentative arrangement," the older woman said hurriedly. "As a matter of fact, Hugh had decided he'd rather spend

this summer at the hotel with someone from the company. *Esprit de corps*, Hugh called it. He wanted to be closer to his cast."

"Good for Hugh." Nina succumbed to temptation and reached for the cigarettes. "Well, obviously Karen can't be expected to take in an eligible young man, so I think I'll invite you to take lodging with the Blairs, Mr. Nichols."

Her announcement shocked Dudley Fortune. He plucked his octagonal-lensed glasses from his breast pocket and fitted them on his blade-sharp nose. "But your condition, Nina!"

"Exactly why I can have Mr. Nichols stay with us. Nobody can gossip about us in my condition."

"I didn't mean that! I mean—the children—it'll be just too much work for you!"

"I'll have the bratlings off my hands in a week or two," said Nina. "I won't have a thing to do."

Martha Selby stirred on the divan. "Perhaps you ought to ask Mr. Nichols if that arrangement is satisfactory to him."

Watching him standing quietly at the mantel, again Karen thought how little she knew about him. But she knew before he spoke he was bound to accept. Instinctively he was certain to ally himself with Nina against the others. She concealed a smile, knowing there was nothing more for them to say.

"Well, that's that," Lloyd Mowrer said thankfully. "I've got to run now, everybody. Best of luck, Nichols."

After she had seen the trio to the door Karen turned in the sudden quiet and went back to the living room.

Nina threw up her arms, sprawling helplessly in her chair. "Lord, what a crew! Are you sure you still want to work with us, Mr. Nichols?"

"I'm just back from Korea," he said. "Almost anything looks good to me."

Karen eyed Nina accusingly. "Does Julian have any idea you're bringing somebody home with you?"

"Well, natch. I told Julie if our new director looked halfway

human I'd kidnap him. I've got to have some kind of company for the man while I'm in the hospital."

When they went outside to the convertible, the light was already waning in the sky. The crickets were busy under the hedges; the garden sprays hissed and whispered over all the lawns. The prolonged waspish rasp of an outboard motor skittered nervously over the lake as they drove toward the Vista Motel.

"I like your Mr. Nichols," said Nina while they waited in the car for him. "He's nice." Her voice dropped musingly. "A funny thing, but he's a little like Alex. He's older, naturally, and more self-assured, but there's something about him . . ."

Karen refused to extend the observation. "You think Martha Selby likes him?"

"Does Martha like anybody except her slob of a son and Hugh Fenwick?" Then Nina grinned. "I think he's sorta cute, personally. With the man situation the way it is, I'd go after him in a minute if I wasn't a pregnant old married woman."

"I'll have to tell Julian that," Karen said gravely. "How soon do you expect the baby now, Nina?"

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"Doctors don't talk about their patients to their families."

"Not much." Nina giggled. "You think I'm terrible, don't you? Well, I am. I guess I'm getting a little hysterical toward the end. Heaven knows I never expected to have three children when I met Julie on that blind date seven years ago. But I don't know. Even though it's a dirty trick on any woman, making her swell up like a dead pig that's been in the river too long, they're worth it. Not only Cissie and Buzzie and Mr. Whozit inside here, but Julie too. . . ." Nina sighed and then looked up, watching Ross Nichols come out of the motel office. "Well, here he is. . . ."

He came quickly down the walk to the convertible, his suitcase bumping awkwardly against his leg. He had a slight limp, Karen noticed. She turned the starter key while he dropped the suitcase in the open luggage compartment behind the front seat. Nina made

room for him. He grinned at them as the convertible moved away from the stucco cottages.

"I had to assure the management I wasn't dissatisfied with the service," he said. "I thought they were going to burst out crying or else handcuff me to the desk."

"That happens every year at this time," Nina said cheerfully. "Everybody gets panicky because the town isn't crawling with visitors on Decoration Day. Two weeks from now you won't be able to move around for vacationists, but you'd never know it to hear the worry warts wailing and moaning."

She chattered blithely all the way to the house. The route led past the Lakeside Hotel and the Teresa Theater, southwest, away from the lake, toward the residential section whose houses had *Rooms for Tourists* cards in their windows during the summer season. She talked about the playhouse and its past successes and failures, the free publicity Julian and his father gave them at the *Gazette*, the private life of Dudley Fortune. She asked Ross Nichols about California and Korea and then bubbled on about Lake Teresa, as though it were the center of her universe, tranquil and untroubled, untouched by the faintest shadow of violence and murder.

When they reached the house, Julian Blair was playing on the front lawn with his children. He lay on his back, holding Cissie high above his chest and supporting Buzzie on his bent legs. Their excited giggling came out to the convertible at the curb.

"Look at them," said Nina. "Cissie was so fat at six months she had biceps on her forearms, and Buzzie's always had the agility of a monkey." She called across the white picket fence fronting the lawn. "Hey, Blair! I thought you were going to put the little Blairs to bed?"

"Mommy!"

"Look, Mommy—we're ackerbats!"

Julian climbed carefully to his feet, still holding Cissie and Buzzie, and then made his way to the car. His straight brown hair

was rumpled above the horn-rimmed glasses perched precariously on his blunt nose. At thirty-two he had the easygoing manner of a transparently honest man.

"Howdy, Karen."

"'Lo, Karen!"

"Lookut us, Karen!"

"These are my jewels," Nina murmured. "Mr. Nichols, my husband. Julie, our new director, Ross Nichols."

Julian thrust a free hand through a maze of squirming arms and legs. "Hello, Ross."

Ross Nichols shook hands quietly and then grinned as the children promptly presented their cheeks to be kissed.

"Mr. Nichols is staying with us, Blair," Nina announced grandly. "Have you cleaned out the royal suite yet?"

"You know I have," said Julian. "You had me fix up that room before you ever went over to Karen's."

"Tactful, isn't he?" Nina murmured. "Well, inside, you two hooligans. It's time you were both sawing wood."

Ross Nichols stepped down to let her out of the car while Julian stooped to tumble the children from his arms.

"Coming in, Karen?"

"No, thanks, Julian. I think I'll go back now." She was conscious of Ross Nichols' nearness as he removed his suitcase from behind the seat. "I feel wearyish tonight."

"I know what you mean," said Julian. "It's been that kind of day."

"Well, it's still not over for you," said Nina at the gate. "Come on, kids. See you tomorrow, Karen."

"G'by, Karen!"

"G'night, Karen!"

Karen put the convertible into gear, ready to leave. Then Ross Nichols extended his hand. Their handclasp was light and brief, almost impersonal. To her chagrin she felt herself blush. Withdrawing her hand, she mumbled good night and then drove quickly away from the white clapboard bungalow. She could hear Cissie

and Buzzie vying excitedly for his attention as she rounded the corner.

On her way home she felt unaccountably alone and lonely. The twilight, rich with the scent of honeysuckle and lilac, was deepening into the soft purple darkness of summer nightfall, evoking an inexplicable nostalgia within her, strangely poignant, bittersweet. She drove faster, eager to get home, hoping her father was already there, knowing he was sure to be late.

When she drove into the garage behind the darkened house, she heard the telephone ringing. She hurried along the walk, conscious of the soft slap of water under the nearby pier. The *Spray's* slim shape, blurred in the darkness, swung leisurely at its mooring. She let herself into the kitchen and then moved swiftly through the deeper darkness inside the house toward the instrument shrilling in the dining room.

"Hello?"

"Karen?" It was the faintest of whispers. "Karen?"

"Yes," she said. "Who is this?"

"You know who it is," said the whisperer. "I feel like talking to you, baby. Better make yourself comfortable. I feel like talking. . . ."

Immediately her hand drooped away from her ear. The voice in the receiver became faint and unintelligible, meaningless as dried seeds shaken in a gourd. Or the vicious whisper of a rattler, she thought, abruptly sick with shame and revulsion. The last such call had been over a month before. She had almost forgotten to expect subsequent calls. It came as a shock after the pleasant hour she had spent with Nina.

"You listening to me, baby?" The voice grated sharply through the perforated diaphragm. "You better listen!"

"I'm listening."

"You better. All I ask is to talk to you every so often. I could talk to the cops, don't forget, but I don't. All you got to do is be nice to me an' listen . . ."

She closed her eyes in a sudden spasm of loathing and disgust as the voice began its now familiar recital of obscenities. The first time it had happened she had listened in horrified fascination, immobilized by the knowledge of her caller's hold over her. But since then she had shut off her mind from the stream of outrageous sexual imagery. She refused to listen.

"You know what else I'd do to you, baby? You think I won't do it sometime when we get together?"

She let the receiver fall away from her shoulder. It swung from its cord like a pendulum against her leg. The filtered voice became a meaningless rattle while sudden anger flooded her body, filling her throat in a hot, choking column. Suddenly, trembling as she stood silent in the darkness, she wanted to kill her tormentor. The desire to obliterate and destroy mounted irresistibly within her. It was the emotion she had known with Peggy Fuller. She knew she had to bring herself under control.

It was because of Peggy Fuller that she had to submit to her anonymous caller's perverted kind of blackmail.

Once again she stood over the crumpled body in the pine-enclosed clearing, fighting nausea as she looked down at the freckled urchin face, knowing her rival was dead and still hating her even in death, then stumbling away and running toward the safety of the convertible in blind panic.

At her side the voice still rasped on, remote and incomprehensible, like the droning of a mosquito in the quiet summer night.

5

THE week end was bright, but on Tuesday morning the sun disappeared behind a shabby blanket of clouds. At the Lakeside Hotel, Arch Gilman hurried out to his launch and buttoned down a tar-

paulin cover over its cockpit. In the afternoon the rain pelted down like a steel curtain, peppering the lake with shrapnel, isolating the hotel in gray desolation.

"Just what we need for business," Gilman grumbled. "The same damn way every year."

The rain continued to fall. Cold, depressing, it confined the hotel's handful of guests to their rooms. It meant indoor work for MacFarland.

For the rest of the week Mac mended and painted screens, repaired loose steps in the basement stairs, purged faulty plumbing, and painted a double bedroom. Working steadily and diligently, as though pacing himself with the unceasing beat of the rain, he was too busy to see much of Ross, who in turn was burdened day and night with a cast to rehearse, sets to design, publicity to write, costuming and posters to supervise. Momentarily their investigation had to be postponed. Each had a specific job to do. Each was confined to his separate place of work by the falling rain.

By Thursday the weather became a source of frustration. It was like the old days, Mac decided, first in Tunisia, then around Casino. Only an occasional sunny hour or two made the week bearable.

On Thursday, after dinner, before the evening rehearsal, Ross talked to Mac, sitting on a promenade bench overlooking the public beach.

"I don't get anywhere," he said. "We've been here six days now, and I'm still so damn busy with the play I can't question anybody."

"You mean that's all you've done?"

"Oh, I managed to get down to the *Gazette* office yesterday morning to look at their August 30 issue and some Chicago papers, but I don't know if it did much good. I found myself reading stuff like weather reports and baseball scores. I think I'm getting punch-drunk. Doing *Hamlet* with amateurs is like making an A-bomb with a grade-school kid's chemistry set."

"You think you've got troubles?" Mac spat past his crossed legs propped on the iron railing in front of them. "Me, I work like a

horse all day and try to pump the help when I can, and they don't even know what time it is. Then Madam Gilman trots out her suspicious act when I start needling her about Wad Brown. We're on a dead-end street, Nichols."

They looked out at the lake. The daytime bathers who had braved the wet sand for two hours of sunshine in the late afternoon had left the beach. A lonely pencil shape of cloud hung above the horizon, like a ruffled feather suspended in the windless evening sky. They watched a power launch circle the island.

"How about the Blairs, pal? What are the jerks like?"

"They're intelligent, happy-go-lucky kids with two kids of their own."

"And another one on the way," Mac amended. "How about young Blair's father? What's he like?"

"I saw him for about three seconds at the *Gazette* office yesterday. He was on his way somewhere. I told Julian I wanted to look at last year's publicity for the playhouse."

"You sound like a real gumshoe, pal. Nice going."

Ross was still troubled and uneasy when he went home after rehearsal. Nina and Julian were playing honeymoon bridge in the living room. For a moment he thought the house was quiet. They seemed intent on their game in an atmosphere as static and peaceful as Alex Fuller's studio portrait on the radio console. Then he realized Cissie and Buzzie were still scuffling in their room, delaying sleep as long as possible. Cissie shrilled with abrupt, startling loudness.

"That child has the screech of a French locomotive," said Julian. "Every time she makes that noise she raises the hackles on the back of my neck."

He stood up from the card table and walked back to their bedroom to subdue them. Nina sat back in her chair, sighing, unconsciously confessing unsuspected weariness. She smiled at Ross and shook her head in a puppylike gesture, as though to shake off her fatigue. It made him think of Doreen's pregnancy, and then he wondered whether Alex Fuller had shared Nina's usual vitality. He

doubted it when he looked at the sensitive, introspective face in the easel frame.

"How was rehearsal, Mr. Nichols?"

"Not bad."

Nina picked up Julian's cards and examined his hand. "It's really a feather in Karen's cap, picking you for our director."

"Maybe we'd better wait for opening night."

"Oh, it'll be swell. I know it will." She carefully replaced the cards face down and then sent up an innocent stare as Julian returned. "You threaten the savages?"

"Cissie says she's seepy, but Buzzie won't let her seep."

"Fine."

"That child sounds as though she'd been taught to talk by a drunken typesetter," said Julian, bending over the coffee table for his pipe. "I wouldn't be surprised if she starts saying nothing but 'Etaoin shrdlu, etaoins shrdlu . . .'"

"Impossible," said Nina. "She can't pronounce *l*." She patted a yawn with the back of her hand. "If you ask me, I think the child's mentally deficient."

"You can stop slandering my children right now. If motherhood weren't sacred to me, I'd sling you around the room." Julian dodged the cushion Nina threw at him and sat down at the table. "Do you want to go on losing this game or don't you?"

"What would you like to bet?"

"You're pretty cocky all of a sudden." Julian held his cards close to his chest, scowling at them from behind his glasses. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Nina said pertly. "The next thing I know you'll be saying I'm cheating. Play your cards, Blair. You're holding up the game."

Ross enjoyed watching them. They were pleasant, companionable people. But Chuck had been killed because Nina's brother had been murdered. How would they behave if they knew he was Chuck's brother? Once again the thought separated them from him.

After a few minutes he excused himself and went along the hall, resenting his inability to speak his mind to them. From the first he had been disarmed by their casual, unstudied hospitality.

In his room, stifling a yawn, he unlocked his suitcase and took out the notes he had jotted down in the *Gazette's* morgue. Despite his fatigue, he felt impelled to review what he had learned. It offered his only avenue of investigation while he remained silent, at once unable and unwilling to tell the Blairs his real identity. To Nina and Julian he was Ross Nichols from California. What link could there be between himself and Charles Vinson, shot and killed in Lake Teresa, buried now in Monterey? He gathered his notes together and then spread them on the secretary-desk beside the bed.

His notes gave him a timetable for August 27. Locally, unlike other parts of the country, it had been a warm, sunny Monday. Chicago had sweltered under a heat wave; baseball games were canceled because of rain throughout Ohio; earthquake tremors had been registered in California. But locally the weather had been ideal. Peggy and Alex Fuller had set out from their one-room apartment in Greenridge at ten in the morning. A neighbor had seen them leave. It was young Fuller's day off from his clerk's job at the Greenridge cannery; he and his wife were driving to Lake Teresa to visit relatives and friends in their ten-year-old Chevrolet. Shortly before ten-thirty Peggy Fuller was seen in a Plymouth sedan by Eunice Barrow, who ran a roadside vegetable stand outside her farmhouse a quarter mile east of the Three Points cutoff on the state highway leading to Lake Teresa. The woman later identified the driver of the sedan as Charles Vinson. At ten fifty-eight Charles Vinson was shot by Wad Brown, who had noticed the Plymouth with California license plates drawn off the highway and had halted his motorcycle to question the stranger behind the wheel. Brown had used his revolver only after the stranger had started to run and refused to obey his command to halt.

Five minutes later, at eleven-five, a Greenridge resident, Edward Newsom, accompanied by Eunice Barrow, racing toward Lake

Teresa with startling news, stopped at sight of the small crowd that somehow had already gathered around Wad Brown and his victim. Newsom had discovered Alex Fuller's body beside the Chevrolet on the road to Greenridge, one and a quarter miles west of the cutoff. Young Fuller had been beaten to death. Eunice Barrow had accompanied Newsom after the latter stopped at the stand to telephone the Lake Teresa police. She recognized Charles Vinson as the stranger beside Peggy Fuller in the Plymouth sedan. Immediately those present broke up and spread out to find Peggy Fuller. Her body had been found within the hour, in a little clearing off a side road leading from the highway to the lake front, two miles west of the spot where Charles Vinson's car had run out of gas. Her clothing was torn and disarranged. There had been a struggle before the girl was shot.

Police Chief William Pollard had praised Wad Brown for his alertness and thanked the citizenry for their co-operation. The relatives of the murdered couple had refused to issue any public statements. The California killer's body had been returned to his family. The case was officially closed.

Two facts emerged from the assembled notes. There had been two witnesses. Both Eunice Barrow and Edward Newsom had to be questioned again. Their questioning would have to wait until after dress rehearsal and opening night. After that the real investigation could begin. Others could be talked to—Pollard, Brown, the Blairs, even Karen James. . . .

Ross pushed his chair back from the desk and stifled another yawn. He fought against it, but again his anxieties about the play clouded his conjecture about Chuck and the Fullers. He wanted to know why Chuck's gun had come to be the murder weapon, and he wanted to know why the girl was with him, but the answers refused to come. There were problems of costuming and lighting to solve, and both Ophelia's mad scene and the last-act duel were still awkward and unpolished.

By now he half regretted Mac's advice to take the job. It gave

him time for nothing else. Since the emergency board meeting he had seen Martha Selby only twice, and then only in passing. Her son Basil played Horatio, but the Selby woman stayed away from rehearsals, and her son never mentioned his dead sister.

Was it his imagination? Or was there a conspiracy of silence about the dead couple?

Ross shook his head and yawned again and started undressing for bed.

6

LATE Friday afternoon Arch Gilman left the Lakeside Hotel with a pair of slacks and a big American flag folded over his arm. He ducked fatly into his car to escape the rain falling in noisy columns from the sloping veranda roof.

"What's the idea?" Mac asked Slop Slasher in the deserted lobby. "Didn't he take that flag to be cleaned last Saturday?"

"Arch gets it cleaned every week." Slop was seventeen, squat, and stocky. "It's a gag with him—dincha know it?" Loudmouthed, insolent-eyed, with the crater-pitted complexion of grubby adolescence, Slop was Gilman's nephew, working around the hotel as a bellhop, dishwasher, chambermaid. "Maxie Gershowitz cleans a flag free with every dry-cleanin' order."

"I know all that. But if Arch picked it up last time——"

"So what?" Slop displayed his yellowed teeth in a short, mirthless laugh. "It's a gag with Arch. It costs Maxie more'n a dozen suits to clean that flag. Oney he's gotta do it. Arch could get the law on him if he wouldn't clean it. He's got that Polack tied up in a knot with it."

In the evening, eating dinner alone in the dining room at a small table against the wall, Mac pushed aside his plate and fished

out the last cigarette in his crumpled pack. The regular dinner hour was over. His waitress hovered nearby, eager to start a conversation. But Hazel had already outworn her usefulness as a fount of information, and her chronic weariness made her as lackluster a fixture in the dining room as the steam table. Mac stood up from his table and walked into the deserted lobby, restless, at loose ends.

He was about to go upstairs when the piano caught his eye. He went over to it, uncovered its chipped keyboard, and sat down. It was the first time he had played in months. At first his hands touched the keys in casual, tentative patterns. Then he let his fingers wander lazily along the keyboard, from bass to treble, seeking an elusive mood, sliding from the elegiac minors of the blues to the off-key harmonics of bebop.

Outside the rain had stopped in the growing dusk.

Several minutes passed before he became aware of his audience. LaVerne Gilman was standing slightly to his left in the white laundered smock she wore during working hours. He looked back at her, the cigarette still in his mouth, his hands weaving variations on a three-note pattern. Her face was expressionless. The murky hazel eyes watched him with the unblinking stare of an engrossed animal or child. He stopped playing.

"Why'd you have to quit?" Her voice was still sullen, still discontented. "Go ahead. Play some more."

Delicately he eased into an obscure blues. He played softly and lazily. Her face was fathomless again, watching him. He recalled the words of the blues from the hall bedrooms and hobo jungles and trailer camps of his itinerant past, talking his song rather than singing it.

*"Oh, she liked the way I done it,
Crazy 'bout the way I done it,
But that Jezebel's gone an' left this town . . ."*

Words and music alike softly mocked cuckold and celibate. It was jeering satire, sexually arrogant and provocative. He sang it

deliberately, as though provoked by the insolence of their first encounter, stung by the sullen line of her mouth, the stringy-loined body under the white smock.

The words floated away, lazy as the blue smoke drifting from the cigarette between his lips. Then he changed the mood again, reverting to jazz. He watched her smile, slowly, grudgingly, as though unwilling to admit its spell, determined to retain her own dominance and stay aloof from the music. It refused to be ignored. Sensual, bedwise, it was a blunt invitation from man to woman. There was no lacy filigree of melodic figures to disguise its forthrightness of purpose. Shunned by the respectable, it was music created and nurtured by the unwanted in field cabin, brothel, and brawling railroad flat.

Suddenly MacFarland let his hands fall on the keys in a crashing discord and stood up from the stool.

"Why stop?"

"Concert's over. I've got other things to do now."

"You going out too?" Her gaze was still inscrutable, unwavering. "Everybody's going out tonight. Slop's taking the boat out. I don't know when Arch'll be back."

"Maybe you can turn in early. You can catch up on your reading."

"I never read in bed."

"I don't blame you. It's bad for the eyes."

For a moment she seemed about to reply, but she remained silent. MacFarland went past her, toward the stairs. At the first landing he glanced down at her. She was still standing beside the piano, looking through the dining room and beyond its windows to the lake, her face secretive and immobile.

Mounting the remaining stairs, Mac walked along the hall to his room. It had started to rain again. When he had closed the door, he went to the bed in the graying gloom and sat down. He was in one of his rare intervals of boredom. Ordinarily, even when at rest, he was alive with the latent energy of an idling machine, always ready to spring into physical action. But now boredom threatened him.

He watched the rain falling steadily outside his window and then picked up the *Lake Teresa Weekly Gazette*.

A moment later he decided against turning on the light to read; instead, taking off his shirt and undershirt, he went into the bathroom to wash. His wide shoulders and hirsute chest had inspired the Delilah in Cincinnati to call him an amiable gorilla. He sluiced water on his face and chest, then rasped his thumb along a wet cheek to test the dark stubble for shaving. He picked up his razor, grimacing automatically at his black-patched reflection in the mirror above the bowl.

He was drying himself when the knock came on his bedroom door. The sound was quick, low, insistent, somehow conspiratorial.

"Okay, okay . . ." He slung the towel over his shoulders. "Don't tear it down."

The instant he opened the door LaVerne Gilman pushed past him and shut it behind her. He heard the key turn in the lock as her hands fumbled behind her back. He looked at her, rubbing his head with the towel. Now her face was far from secret and unfathomable.

"Well, hi, Jezebel . . ."

Afterward they lay quietly together on the bed.

"You think I'm terrible," she said. "You think I'm a bitch."

"Not necessarily. What's your Wassermann?"

"You devil."

"Is that all I am? Not even a bastard?"

Her breasts shook when she laughed. They were full and pendulous, larger than he had expected, heavy and ripe above her thin loins. He touched them with his finger, making them sway back and forth. She slapped his hand with arch chastisement, laughing softly again.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, just about Arch. I knew he wouldn't hire that other guy with you. He's too good-looking."

"The MacFarlands aren't a pulchritudinous lot, but we have our

good points. . . ." Stretching out his hand to the bedside table, Mac groped for the unopened cigarettes he had meant to take downstairs to dinner. "Smoke?"

"Okay."

After she had retrieved her smock from the floor and covered herself in false modesty, they lay back on the pillows and smoked in silence. It was raining hard again. The gray slanting spears struck the sill outside the closed window with such intensity that the rebounding drops formed a fine white spray, like a ghostly halation blurring the sharp edge. Their cigarettes lighted their faces with an unearthly glow in the grayness.

"Who's at the desk?"

"Slop couldn't take the boat out in the rain, so I told him I had a real bad headache and I was going up to my room and not to disturb me, not even put any calls on my phone or knock at the door."

"You weave a neat web of deceit, doll. How about Arch? Won't he be back soon?"

"Not until after midnight. You don't need to worry about Arch." She giggled a little nervously. "I bet you wonder why I did this."

"To get back at Wad Brown?"

Her eyes opened wide in angry surprise, as though abnormally dilated by the growing dark. "What's that mean?"

"A week ago tonight you got stuck when his car broke down."

Her voice became sullenly defensive. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe you ought to get around more. Every punk in town knows you've been sleeping with Brown."

"That's a lie!"

"Use your head. How else would I know about it?"

"That crazy louse!" She began to curse Brown in a steady stream of vindictive epithets. "Every time he gets some bourbon in him! I told him to keep his damn mouth shut!"

"Didn't Arch know?"

"A lot he'd care."

"You been married long?"

"Ten years. We came here from Buffalo five years ago." Her voice became edged with irony. "Any more questions?"

"What goes with Arch and his flag-cleaning stunt with Max Gershowitz?"

"He just don't like foreigners," she said sullenly. "I could use a drink myself now. If you've got any bourbon——"

"Sorry, baby. I'm not Wad Brown."

"Will you forget that louse?"

"Don't get emotional, doll. The guy interests me. Seems to me I've seen him somewhere else before."

"Whereabouts?"

"That's what I can't figure."

His questions had aroused her own curiosity. "What did you do before you blew in here?"

"This and that," Mac said. "I was in the Army for a couple of centuries."

"Your boy friend too?"

"My boy friend too. But not together. He got himself involved in Korea."

"How come you two knock around together now? Nichols don't seem like your type at all."

"We like excitement, doll. We usually find it."

"In Lake Teresa?"

"Why not? You had a couple of murders here last year."

Her voice sharpened quickly. "How'd you know that?"

"I got a shave and a haircut my first day in town. The barber told me all about it."

She seemed to relax. "That wasn't anything special. It was over and done with in one day."

"Two young kids, huh?" His hand stroked her thigh. "In the springtime of their life, the old guy told me. A clean-cut young guy and his sweet young bride."

"That's a laugh. That Peggy Fuller was no sweet young bride. If I'd had her reputation at her age, my old man would've crippled me. She was a real little tramp. I heard about her from Slop and Wad Brown."

"Wasn't Brown the one who shot down her killer?"

She slapped his hand. "Will you shut up about him?"

"You're the one who brought him up again," Mac said. "How about Slop? What did Slop say about Peggy Fuller?"

"He claims Wad fooled around with her before she hooked young Fuller."

"How would Slop know?"

"He gets around," she said. "He's a real character." Contempt invaded her voice. "I have to keep my shades down and my door locked with that punk around the place. He gets his fun out of looking."

"Well, who can blame him, cookie?"

Her fingers began to trace the lower edge of the patch on his face, not quite daring to investigate beneath it. "What happened to your eye?"

"I lost it in a crap game."

"You sure think you're funny, don't you?"

"It's an old habit of mine."

"Don't you have any other habits?" she murmured. "Do you have to talk so damn much?"

It was after ten before she left his room.

"So long," Mac said. "It's nice knowing you, Peggy."

She stopped buttoning her white smock. "What's that?"

"Just a gag."

"I can do without that kind of a gag," she said. "I don't aim to get myself murdered by anybody."

He had to keep the room dark while she opened the door and peered into the hall. Then she was gone, leaving him alone on the bed. He reached for his cigarettes and then stretched out on the bed, smoking again, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling.

"EVERY TIME I hear the play I find new things in it," Ross said. "When I hear the soliloquies, every word falls naturally and perfectly into place. It's like watching a design being completed before your eyes. Each word and phrase is a logical development of the design, and yet it's always new, always exciting." He watched the people moving awkwardly about the stage. "And yet there's something disturbing about the whole thing. It's so modern it's a little frightening."

Karen James settled back in the aisle seat beside him. "Why frightening?"

"Because its people thrive on conspiracy and meanness. They swagger, brawl, booze, and love on a heroic scale, but few have learned gentleness and tolerance. Treachery's a commonplace with them. Loyalty's like a negotiable security, transferred from one side to the other, depending upon the outcome of each succeeding skirmish. We've reverted to the same meanness, the same viciousness and unprincipled ambition. We've slipped back a half dozen centuries. In Shakespeare you find the cruelty and violence camouflaged with colorful pageantry. Today we have the same cruelty and violence camouflaged with pious platitudes."

"But now we see through the camouflage, don't we?"

"I don't know," he said, thinking of Chuck shot and killed along the road from Greenridge to Lake Teresa, remembering the Negro on the station platform. "I doubt it. . . ."

On the stage familiar words rang out again:

*"O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder! . . ."*

The next afternoon, toward the end of the rehearsal, Karen James came to the playhouse. Her hair, lustrous as soft sandalwood, was plaited in two braids over her broad shoulders. He noted almost impersonally her small nose and the generous cut of her mouth and then found himself thinking of Doreen's dark brittleness. He wondered about Doreen and her new marriage in Texas. Then he brushed the thought aside and forced his attention back to the scene at hand. Karen sat down quietly beside him.

*"O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell—
Rebellious hell—"*

In white T-shirt and faded dungarees, Hamlet faltered for the tenth time on the bare stage.

The botched speech brought Ross to his feet, grateful for the interruption.

"That's enough for today, Dick. We're all getting a little stale. I think we all need a day off, everybody. See you here first thing in the morning."

Karen James stood quietly beside him while a mumbling exodus began from the auditorium. "We all need a day off, do we?" Her slow warm smile appeared in her eyes, then traversed the invisible route from eyes to mouth, shaping her soft, curved lips in faint amusement when he nodded with a half frown. "Then how about really relaxing? You know you haven't any publicity to get out today, and you can go over the costumes again tomorrow. Come out on the *Spray* with me."

Although he had hoped to borrow the Blairs' coupé to drive to Greenridge to talk to Edward Newsom, somehow the prospect seemed uninviting. He still felt tired, depleted of energy. Either he was working too hard on the play or he was suffering a post-Korea reaction. He decided to forget about Edward Newsom and go for a boat ride.

Karen lived in a big weather-worn limestone house whose arched windows and doorways were framed with rusticated stonework.

Roses and honeysuckle bloomed in the garden. Behind the house a handsome inboard runabout with a spotless deck and a capacious cockpit was tied up at a wooden pier. The launch gleamed white in the sun. Karen handled the boat with enviable ease, pulling away from the pier, threading her way past the canoes and dinghies tied to sloops and power craft.

"This is the fifty-cent tour," she said as they circled the island, close enough for them to see the arrowed indentations imprinted in the sand by the darting terns and pipers. "Now I have you to myself . . ."

Ross glanced at her. But there was no coyness in her manner as she cut the powerful twin-six engines and let the launch drift. Her gaze was direct and honest, without coquetry or affectation.

"I want to find out about you, Mr. Nichols. I've known you almost two weeks now, and you're still an unknown quantity."

"What do you want? Birthplace? Antecedents?"

"That's the orthodox beginning for interviews, isn't it?"

"There's nothing to tell," Ross said. "I got back from Korea last month, and if I never see another uniform again—" Then he shrugged. "Not that the war's ever over, you understand. War's no longer an interruption in our lives. It's part of a greater pattern of conflict that's always going on."

"What do you intend to do with yourself now? Will you stay in show business?"

"The truth is, I'm not the show-business type. Besides, the twentieth century doesn't seem right for anything but the mathematical mind. It's a time for equations and formulae, gun elevations and navigation for long-range bombers. I can barely do long division. . . ."

It was a quiet, discreet conversation. They avoided the pitfalls of argument and personality. A certain prudent detachment guided all they said. Their hour on the water was pleasant and casual, remote from immediate reality.

The next afternoon, between rehearsals, they rented bicycles and

rode along the little-used byroads linking nearby farms with the state highway. The fields were fragrant with grain and pink clover; birds sang in the roadside oaks and poplars. They came around a curve, laughing at the raucous profanity of a blue jay. A new sedan was parked under a weathered oak. Beyond the tree, behind a wire fence, four Holsteins watched the car with placid incuriosity. They pedaled past the cows and the sedan, aware of a couple in the front seat wrapped in close embrace.

Around the next curve Karen called a sudden halt, out of breath, laughing again.

"What is it?" Ross slid his bicycle down beside hers on the grass. "What's the joke?"

"It isn't really a joke. Just Edgar Selby. I'm sure he saw us."

"What about him?"

"He's Martha Selby's husband. That was Edgar selling another property to another prospect."

"Nice selling."

"Very." Then she sobered. "I wish we hadn't seen him."

"Embarrassed?"

"A doctor's child isn't easily embarrassed. But I know what the Selbys can be like. They can be nasty and vindictive for no reason at all. I just hope he didn't notice us."

It was an ideal opening for him. What better way to ask about the Selbys and their murdered daughter? What was Peggy Fuller like? What did they think of her? He could casually mention his discovery of the tragedy while going through the *Gazette* files—or he could say Mac had heard gossip about it at the hotel. From that point he could then progress to the Blairs and their reaction to the crime.

To his annoyance he remained silent, unable to launch the opening gambit.

Beyond the crest of the next slope they raced downward to the highway. A moment later he was on familiar ground. They were approaching the estate he had seen on his first tour of reconnais-

sance. He recognized the barbed-wire fence, the weeping willows arching toward the water, the powerful launch tied up at the landing pier. The Doberman pinscher he had seen appeared again, loping along behind the fence. Its sharp, biting yelp drifted up to them on the slope.

"Whose place is that?"

"Are you impressed?"

"It seems slightly baronial."

"That's the word for Langdon Garth. His family built their house here about twenty years ago. It was shut up for a long time. Then Garth came back two or three years ago and reopened it. He's quite wealthy and keeps pretty much to himself."

The dog below them vanished into the evergreen grove. It looked savage, a brute to avoid on the wrong side of the fence.

"Garth not only keeps to himself," Ross said. "His *Restricted* signs seem to have a bite to them."

"Then you've noticed our *Restricted* signs?"

"I saw them the Sunday I met you."

"You don't like them, do you?"

"Do you?"

"I hate them," Karen said with unexpected loathing. "They're the Selbys' handiwork. They put them up when they started developing their new subdivisions. We never had anything like that in Lake Teresa until the Selbys introduced it."

Ross thought of the barber on Main Street, Wad Brown and the Negro on the station platform, Arch Gilman and his American flag. He had been silent before. Now he felt he had to speak. He hesitated a moment too long.

"Let's not spoil our afternoon," Karen said abruptly. "Race you! Last one to the top buys ice cream!"

Her sudden challenge caught him off guard. She stood up on the pedals, pumping hard. Her bicycle shot ahead under the sudden acceleration of effort.

When Ross bore down on his pedal, intending to race after her,

burning pain forked through his left knee. It gripped his stomach with numbing nausea, making his nerves jump and flutter, draining the blood from his face. He stopped short, his leg slightly off the ground, trying not to put his weight on it again. The knee still throbbed and burned after the first stinging thrust of pain. He closed his eyes, resting his weight on the crossbar, waiting for the pain to pass.

Karen called to him in derisive triumph from the top of the next slope, but he was unable to answer her.

"Ross!" She was bending over him when he opened his eyes. "What's happened?"

"Nothing." Feeling the blood slowly returning to his face, he straightened stiffly. "Just my knee . . ." The moment he moved pain darted through him. "Damn . . ."

She caught his hand. "Ross, you're ill. We'd better go back."

"If you don't mind"—he had to force the words out—"rest first . . ."

She helped him from his bicycle. Her touch was gentle, but it seemed to conceal unsuspected strength. Steel in velvet, he thought, lowering himself to the grass. She looked down at him with curious, fearful eyes.

He grinned. "Don't look so tragic. I'll be all right in a minute."

"It's really serious, isn't it?"

"Just a loose piece of cartilage floating around, hoping to make trouble. Most of the time I forget all about it. But any kind of vigorous exercise makes it act up. You'd think shrapnel could do a more impressive job of turning me into a cripple home from the wars."

"What happened to Mac? The same thing?"

"That was a long time ago. A machine-gun bullet at Cassino."

"Cassino . . . Korea . . ." She shook her head musingly. "Except for college at Madison, I've spent my life right here." Robins fluttered and chirped in the rustling leaves above them. "Just like Alex Fuller—"

Ross spoke with forced casualness. "Who's Alex Fuller?"

There was nothing about his voice to arouse suspicion, and yet she hesitated. The pause became noticeable. She flushed as he looked at her.

"He was Nina's brother," she said. "He—he's dead now." She rose swiftly to her feet, turning her face away from him. "Do you think you can go back now?"

8

IT WAS after three in the morning before Ross called a halt to the dress rehearsal. With Karen James beside him to take down his notes, he answered final questions from his electricians and prop men while his cast changed and dressed backstage. One by one they wandered back to the auditorium, their faces drawn and pale with fatigue. Even Basil Selby, he noted, had nothing to say. He gave them last-minute instructions, added a few encouraging words, and then gathered his notes and locked up the playhouse. It brought back memories of Stanford and Pasadena, when a dueling foil had been more important than a rifle, eager co-operation more productive than a chain of command.

With her coat draped like a cape about her shoulders, Karen James went down the flagstone steps with him in silence, ready to drive home.

In the morning, after breakfast, Ross tried to read the Sunday papers from Chicago while Julian played with the children on the lawn. It was impossible to concentrate on the events of the outside world. He had to get back to the pressing reality of Elsinore and correct the errors of dress rehearsal.

In the evening he found himself decked out in Julian's dinner jacket. He felt like an impostor in it, but Nina insisted he had to wear it.

"Those fancy pants aren't going to see me looking like a watermelon on stilts," she said. "I'll wait until tomorrow night. The second night's always proletarian night."

"Won't Julian be there for the paper?"

"Julie can cover it without a soup-and-fish. Go on, now. I know it'll fit you. Wear it."

He saw Mac briefly on Main Street before the evening performance.

"Well, good luck, kid. Let's hope Zanuck and Goldwyn have talent scouts in the audience."

"I'd settle for one good lead about Chuck. I'm going to have to start doing something about him tomorrow."

"You might start with Slop Slasher."

Ross stepped aside to let a homeward-bound beach party go past them. "What about him?"

"I don't know exactly. I got the young punk talking about Wad Brown this morning. According to the Slasher character, Brown's a real phony. I tried to steer him on the Fuller case, but then he clammed up. It might mean something. In any case, he's avoided me since then."

"Maybe I'd better see him," Ross said. "I'll put him down with Newsom and Eunice Barrow on my agenda for tomorrow."

At the foot of the slope below the playhouse the cars were parked bumper to bumper along the highway.

When the curtain rose at last, the hushed audience greeted the set with involuntary applause. The lighting which had taken so many hours of planning and argument justified all his efforts. It invested his simple platform set with all the bleak desolation of Elsinore. The sentinels and Horatio had an authentic authoritative-ness in their modern battle dress.

*"How now, Horatio! you tremble, and look pale:
Is not this something more than fantasy?
What think you on't?"*

Ross nodded his approval, convinced of the rightness of his interpretation, but nervousness fluttered his stomach. He brought himself under control by thinking about Mac's words concerning Slop Slasher, determined to see Slasher as soon as he decided on his method of approach. During the acts he hurried backstage, smiling his encouragement.

At last, with the final cannon salvo and the final wave of applause, he was able to relax. The burden of production was off his shoulders; the excited murmur out front assured him everyone was satisfied. Inwardly he cringed at its crudities, but he knew he was sure to be asked to handle the rest of the season. It was a decision he preferred to postpone. He had come to Lake Teresa because of Chuck, not to become a straw-hat entrepreneur. He had to work now to establish his brother's innocence, to erase the bewildered shame from his mother's face.

"Mac's coming back," said Karen James, at once regal and festive in white tulle. "He didn't want to, but I insisted." Her face was bright with pride and affection above her bare shoulders. "It's a wonderful job, Ross. We've never had anything like it before."

"Thanks." He looked past her, warming again at the sight of the ungainly head bobbing in the sea of faces like a coconut bouncing in sea foam. "Here's Mac . . ."

All around them the cast and technical people basked in the praise of relatives and friends. Dudley Fortune and Lloyd Mowrer nodded and smiled. A giggling redhead threw her arms around Basil Selby and kissed him.

"Nice going, pal," Mac said, grinning. "How'd you like it?"

"I don't know. I was in a coma."

As they laughed, other voices hailed them from across the stage. They were urged to hurry, everyone would be there.

"Looks like you're being paged," said Mac. "Don't let me keep you, Nichols."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I think you are," Karen murmured. "I've been detailed to take you to Martha Selby's reception."

"When did that come up?"

"It's been planned for some time. It's a surprise."

"But nobody said anything to me about—"

"Don't argue with the lady," Mac said. "Run along, pal. Now you know why you're wearing that tux."

"Of course," said Karen. "Now we can finally celebrate."

When they reached the Selbys' colonial mansion on the north shore, Martha Selby greeted them with shrill effusion the instant they crossed the threshold. The limp, stringy net of her hair had already routed every stratagem devised by her hairdresser; it hung in untidy, discolored strands on her bare shoulders. Almost immediately she darted away to greet another arrival.

Karen slipped her hand through Ross's arm, then smiled around at various acquaintances. A string trio and a harpist from the high school played in an alcove adjoining the dining room. She steered him away from the ostentatious glissandi of the harp.

"I'm not a drinking man, but I could use a drink," he said. "I suddenly want to get quietly pie-eyed."

They were on their second round of rum punch when Basil Selby wandered over to them. Basil had been drinking. His pale face seemed to sag like fallen bread dough. They watched his soft, limp hands describe vague circles and parabolas as he walked, as though the alcohol had dealt his physical appearance and nerve structure an all-inclusive blow.

"Meet my dad yet, Nichols?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, c'mon. You too, baby. Pop wantsa meet ya. Says he'd like to see guy who can make me an actor."

Basil escorted them through the noisy, crowded room to the lesser confusion of the terrace. Voices were less strident in the quiet shadows. There was less striving for attention. The couples sil-

houetted against the lake devoted themselves to their partners and the glasses in their hands.

"Here he is, Dad. Ya said ya wanted to meet him."

"What's that, son?"

"Nichols. Ya said ya'd like to meet——"

"Oh, of course." The elder Selby had been interrupted while engaged in intimate byplay with a plump little brunette. "Thanks, fella . . ." He grimaced rather than smiled his pleasure. "Hello, Karen. How do you do, Mr. Nichols?"

They murmured polite responses. Selby's bland countenance was unruffled by the slightest flicker of recognition. The girl beside him smiled her greeting. A faint blush betrayed the trend her tête-à-tête with Edgar Selby had been taking. The dapper, weak-chinned man scowled as his son flung his arm about her waist.

"Your mother was looking for you, Basil. . . ." Then he remembered his responsibilities as their host. "Have you met everybody, Mr. Nichols? Karen really ought to introduce you. Has he met Langdon Garth yet, Karen?"

Langdon Garth had already caught Ross's attention. He was holding court a few feet away, presiding over a little covey of listeners. A big man, nearer forty than thirty, with a massive head, a firm jaw, and a strong mouth, he was the driver of the British sports car. His nose was fleshy and straight, impressive as a clenched fist. His dark eyes were hooded by heavy, overlapping lids. His hair was cropped short, thick, coarse, somewhat wavy. The careless lines of his flannel slacks and odd jacket were the product of expensive tailoring. He made Ross acutely conscious of his borrowed dinner jacket.

"The brotherhood of man has always been a fraternity of weaklings," Garth was saying when Selby led them over to him. "The cowards and the misfits and the chronic invalids always want to save humanity. The humanity lovers are sick men. Their love of man is a puling distortion of their loathing for mankind."

In the lull that followed his pronouncement Ross was introduced

to him. They shook hands. Garth's grip was forceful. His hands were massive, blunt-fingered, with square nails cut in a straight line beneath the fingertips. An ornate signet ring on his little finger bit deeply into Ross's palm as they clasped hands. Garth bowed briefly to Karen, then looked back at Ross from under his heavy, hooded lids.

"You did an excellent job with a mediocre play, Mr. Nichols." He had an actor's voice, deep, rounded, resonant. "You transformed the crudest of melodramas into a stirring tour de force."

"I thought I had a pretty good play to start with."

"Surely you're not a Shakespeare idolator? I can assure you it's really an abominable work in every respect."

Ross shrugged. "That's news to me."

Garth laughed. "You surprise me, Mr. Nichols. I thought your interpretation showed a deeper understanding of the author's unconscious meanings. After all, your premise is valid. The world undoubtedly will be ravaged completely and irrevocably unless we come to our senses and bow to the inevitable."

A faint stirring of mistrust crept under Ross's scalp. "Maybe you misunderstood my interpretation. I'm not sure I know what you mean by inevitability."

"Really, Mr. Nichols? Suppose you give me your definition first?"

"Well, I like to think humanity will work out a solution to save itself. Before the world is completely ravaged, I mean. I tried to put it in my show. But it's still a hope, not an inevitability."

"Definitely not an inevitability," Garth murmured. "The unfortunate truth is otherwise, I'm afraid. The future belongs to those who have no qualms about saying one thing and doing quite another. In other words, the future belongs to the unsqueamish."

All at once Ross felt like a fool, abruptly aware of the amused hostility encircling him. Garth's disciplined opulence, his knowing smile, his air of impregnable superiority were disturbing. He knew a quick sense of relief when someone else began talking about taxes and the high cost of marine hardware. He almost welcomed the

resultant grumbling, content to listen to the familiar refrain, thinking too late of the barbed answers he might have given Garth.

It was long after midnight when they left. Karen turned off the highway for the winding country lanes they had traveled on their rented bicycles. She switched off the headlights. The darkened car drove slowly through the moonlight. The familiar terrain, transmuted by the eerie chiaroscuro of half-light and shadow, became an enchanted landscape.

"... so lovely," she whispered, strangely hushed. "You almost expect to see sprites and elves spring out of the ground."

"I hope not. I couldn't cope with dryads and leprechauns tonight."

Suddenly Ross had no desire to talk. Part of his mind was intent again on the play, improvising new business for the next performance, changing exits, improving make-up. But the rest of his thoughts revolved about his encounter with Langdon Garth. Day and night for two weeks he had lived in another world, absorbed in the endless details involved in the preparation of the play. Now, thanks to Garth, he was back in the everyday world. Garth had professed admiration for his technical proficiency, but his praise was coldly impersonal, as though he had applauded the efficient functioning of a dynamo or a delicate precision instrument. Garth had managed to do a thorough job of ruining his evening for him.

Forget it, he thought. Let it go.

Now he could settle down to the actual business at hand. He had to see Slop Slasher at the hotel, Eunice Barrow, the other witness in Greenridge. After that he could decide about Wad Brown and the tactics to use against Chuck's killer. He hadn't seen Brown since the incident in Sam's Inn. He regretted their failure to meet. He wanted to act within a legal framework, but if necessary he could resort to MacFarland's personal methods, like the sugar in the gas tank.

Karen leaned forward to the headlight switch. Blazing quicksilver splashed in every rut and gully of the winding road. The convertible picked up speed in the waning darkness.

Outside the Blairs' darkened bungalow Ross thanked her and quietly said good night. He felt strangely sober, drained of energy. A rooster crowed somewhere in the distance as he let himself inside and tiptoed to his room.

He still thought about Slop Slasher and Langdon Garth and Wad Brown while he removed Julian's dinner jacket.

What next? Where did he start?

He was asleep within five minutes.

9

HIS ROOM sparkled with sunlight when he awakened. For once he hadn't dreamed. After rubbing his eyes, he peered at his watch. It was almost eleven-thirty. Then he realized what had wakened him. The telephone was ringing outside his closed door. Then it stopped. He could hear Nina answering the call at the end of the hall.

His first conscious thought as he sat up concerned Langdon Garth. Then he thought of Wad Brown. It was a strange combination. Why had his mind linked them together? It was too soon after waking to search for an answer. Rubbing his eyes again, he swung out of bed to dress. His thoughts moved on to Slop Slasher, Edward Newsom, Eunice Barrow.

As he dressed he began to remember all the fluffs and bungled bits of business which had marred his opening night. Away from the playhouse, removed from the uncritical applause of an audience eager to be pleased, he could look at his production with a certain detachment. Morning-after hindsight forced him to admit it was only an amateur effort. The acting was inadequate, and his direction had failed to compensate for his lack of competent performers. His preoccupation with Chuck's murder had blinded him to obvious flaws in his approach to the play. The production seemed to satisfy

Lake Teresa, but he knew better. It was crude and awkward. He had never really learned his craft. He had to start learning all over again.

When he entered the kitchen, Nina turned from the refrigerator, milk carton in hand. Ordinarily she greeted him with a warm smile. This morning her face was pale and grave under her blond curls.

"Something wrong, Mrs. Blair?"

"Julian just called," she said. "We—we had a murder in town last night." The milk carton shook in her hand. "Somebody's killed Wad Brown."

A robin sang outside the open window above the kitchen sink.

"Wad Brown?" Ross repeated. "You mean the cop?"

"Uh-huh." Nina set the milk carton on the sink drainboard. "His body was found on the highway leading to Waunona and Greenridge around ten o'clock this morning. Julian said he'd been beaten to death."

"He was a big man for anyone to beat up, wasn't he?" Listening to his voice make conversation, Ross tried to absorb the full significance of Brown's murder. He had come to Lake Teresa in search of justice. Now he knew he had also wanted revenge. As Chuck's executioner, Brown had deserved retaliation and punishment. But it was too late for revenge. The unexpected development threatened all his plans. "Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet." Nina sat down at the kitchen table, white-faced, gripping the table edge with both hands. "Julian said everything's up in the air. Chief Pollard's busy investigating, but that doesn't mean a thing. Right now they only know Brown was killed five or six hours before his body was found."

"How is it he wasn't found until ten? That road's pretty well traveled, isn't it?"

"Apparently nobody bothered to stop when they saw his car parked off the road. A couple of boys walking along the road found him. They looked inside the car, and there he was, doubled up on the floor. . . ." Nina's voice had thickened. She halted, her mouth

working behind the abrupt protection of her hands. Her face reacted to the threat of nausea. "Sorry, Ross. I—I don't mean to scare you. . . ."

"What's wrong? Can I get anything for you?"

"I'm all right. . . ." She tried to reinstate self-control. "I know I'm being a fool. I—I keep thinking about my brother." She looked up wanly. "Alex was murdered only last August. Both my brother and his wife were—were killed. . . ."

Ross watched her struggle to maintain control. "Wad Brown was mixed up in that, wasn't he?"

"How did you know?"

"I read about it when I was going through last year's file of the *Gazette*." He wondered how far he could go. He still couldn't gauge whether the time had come for him to reveal his true identity. "I noticed their killer was shot before anybody even knew what he had done."

"Wad Brown shot him. Charles Vinson, his name was. It turned out Brown was perfectly justified."

"I thought maybe Brown was just a trigger-happy cop. . . ."

"Oh, he was no hero. A blow-hard, a bully, and Lord knows what else. I'm sure Julie and Daddy Blair know plenty about Brown that they've never even told me. But this time he really did his duty. There's just no question about how Alex and Peggy were killed." Nina forced a smile and then stood up from the table. "Well, there's no use tormenting myself about it. I'll get you some breakfast."

"Don't bother. I'll get it."

"It's no bother," she said. "I could use some coffee myself now."

Ross stood hesitant while she lighted the gas. Now what? Was it time to talk to the Blairs in all honesty about Chuck and himself? Somehow it still didn't seem like the right moment for it. Perhaps it was best to wait until he knew more about Brown's sudden demise. Who had killed him? And why? He would have to wait for the answers. Meanwhile one thing had become clear. Brown's death didn't bring his investigation to an end. His mother's grief wasn't

canceled by Brown's murder. Only cleansing her son's name of the stigma of murder could bring a measure of solace to her. There was still work to be done. He still had to learn the truth about the murder of Alex and Peggy Fuller.

He looked out the window at the driveway. "I see Julian left the car."

"Daddy Blair drove him to the office. I said I wanted to go shopping, but I don't feel much like it now. You can use it if you like."

"Well, if you're sure you won't be going out—" It offered him a means of going to Greenridge to question Edward Newsom. "Where are the imps?"

"Across the street. I know I won't be using it, Ross. Go ahead and take it."

"Thanks, I will. I'd like to take the day off, anyway. I can drive around and relax."

It was noon when he drove away from the house. He felt a certain sense of frustration over Brown's death. He had never talked to the big, soft-bellied man. Now he wished he had engaged in an actual encounter with him on the station platform. But instantly he knew that was absurd. Both Chuck and Brown were dead, both part of the irrecoverable past, but Chuck's guilt still remained. He still had to carry out what he had set out to do.

The fields were green and lush along the highway. The coupé had none of the power of Karen's convertible, but it was good to be behind the wheel, to be more than a passenger again. He wondered what Karen would say about Brown's death. Maybe he could talk to her about Alex Fuller now that Nina had mentioned the case to him. The conspiracy of silence which had prevailed had been broken.

As he increased his speed, black-and-white signs beside the state highway markers warned of the approaching Three Points cutoff. To go to Waunona, one turned left. To go to Greenridge, one turned right. The highway led straight on to Madison and Milwaukee. In another quarter mile he passed the roadside stand operated

by Eunice Barrow. A small wooden counter shielded from the sun by a wooden overhang, it was empty and untended at the moment. He drove on. The right-hand arrow pointed to Greenridge. He turned right at the cutoff, leaving the concrete highway for the macadam county road.

Within half a mile he passed the spot where Alex Fuller had been killed. He could only estimate the spot by watching his speedometer. An ordinary stretch of road, with oaks and elms on either side, it was marked by a soft wide shoulder on the north side of the road. Young Fuller could have pulled off the road without much trouble. If Chuck had been driving along the same road, he could have grazed Fuller's car if the latter had been parked or moving. But that didn't mean that murder would follow. Chuck was incapable of violence. All the physical evidence in the world had yet to convince him that Chuck could have committed murder.

He reached Greenridge in another twenty minutes. His speed had been moderate, and there had been no other traffic. It was something to keep in mind. He slowed as he came into Greenridge. The town was smaller than Lake Teresa. Snowy vapor clouds rose from the cannery stacks. It seemed to be the only industry in the community. He had jotted down Edward Newsom's address. He stopped at the first big service station on Main Street and asked how to get to Marquette Street.

The street was five minutes away. But Edward Newsom no longer lived at 465 Marquette. He had sold the little brick bungalow in December and had moved his family to Boston. The new tenant knew nothing about him.

"Thanks very much," Ross said. "Thanks for your trouble."

He returned to the coupé and headed back to Lake Teresa. Disappointment lent a new edge to his sense of frustration. He had hoped to get a firsthand account about Alex Fuller from Newsom. Now he had to rely on Eunice Barrow. He remembered the empty fruit-and-vegetable stand and wondered whether he would find her there.

The stand was open for business when he returned. He pulled the coupé off the side of the road and then sat behind the wheel for a moment before turning off the engine. The stand was heaped with fruits and vegetables. A woman in a peppermint-stick-striped gingham dress and a green eyeshade of Helen Wills vintage sat on a folding deck chair behind the stand. He hoped it was Eunice Barrow as he moved toward her.

"Good afternoon!" She was middle-aged, big-mouthed, and gaunt-shouldered, with prominent, sloping teeth and frizzled gray hair like tangled straw. "Grand day, isn't it?"

Ross nodded his agreement. "Miss Barrow?"

"That's right!" She beamed at him like an amiable horse. "Something for you?"

"I'm looking for information, I'm afraid, not something to buy. I want to talk to you about last August twenty-seventh."

"You mean the day the young Fullers were murdered?"

"Yes. I'm checking on their killer. He was from California, you know. It's an insurance matter."

The moment he added his lie about the insurance he regretted the improvisation. If she demanded his credentials, his whole attack would collapse. It would have been simpler to keep quiet or to tell the truth.

"I see." She seemed to be satisfied with his explanation. "Just what do you want to know, sir?"

"As I understand it, you saw Mrs. Fuller drive past here with the killer before she was murdered."

The white, jutting teeth flashed in a quick smile. "Oh, lands, yes. I opened up the stand at ten o'clock that Monday. Poor Peggy Fuller went by at ten twenty-seven."

"Ten twenty-seven? How do you know it was that exact time?"

"Oh, I had my little radio playing, and I'd just looked at my watch to check the time given by the announcer."

"Did you see the driver's face?"

"Heavens, yes. I recognized him the instant I laid eyes on him

later on. He was already dead, but I couldn't mistake him for anybody else."

"How did Peggy Fuller seem as they went by?" He watched a faint frown contort her face. "Was she frightened? Did she try to attract your attention?"

"Well, no, she didn't even look at me. She was turned toward the driver. Sort of hypnotized, I guess, like a bird with a snake. He must've had his gun pointed right at her." Eunice Barrow shook her head in profound commiseration. "That poor child! If I'd known she was driving straight to her death . . . But I didn't know a thing about it until that Mr. Newsom from Greenridge stopped at eleven o'clock to use my phone. Only trouble was, of course, it was out of order, with me waiting two days for the company to send out a repairman. That meant Mr. Newsom couldn't call in about finding Alex Fuller's body on the road to Greenridge, and I'd seen Peggy Fuller go by a half hour before, so we both started for town. But then we saw that crowd around Wad Brown on the highway, and so we stopped to tell Wad Brown, and then we found out he'd already shot and killed the young fellow I'd seen driving Peggy Fuller past my stand. She wouldn't've been dead more than fifteen or twenty minutes after fighting to save her honor and her life. . . ."

"Did you hear any shots between the time she drove past you and when Edward Newsom stopped to use your telephone?"

For a moment, as her horse face rose expectantly and reminiscently, he half expected her to whinny. Her big, uneven teeth pressed against her lower lip with the effort of remembering. At last she shook her head in a negative response.

"I didn't hear a thing. I just don't know if gunshots would carry that far."

"Was it noisy at the time?"

"Lands, no. All the traffic was between ten and ten-thirty. After that it was quiet until Mr. Newsom drove up."

"What kind of traffic? You mean other people went past here at that time?"

"Just a few trucks and such. Going to Waunona and Greenridge, you know, and others going to Lake Teresa. Then there were one or two people I recognized."

"Who were they?"

"Well, Dr. James's daughter . . ." Eunice Barrow smiled again. "Karen James, you know. She went by in her new convertible at ten-fifteen. She was on her way back to Lake Teresa."

"How do you know it was ten-fifteen?"

"I'd just turned on my little radio. The announcer said it was ten-fifteen just when she drove by."

"She didn't stop?"

"She was going too fast to stop."

Ross frowned. "Was she the only one who went by?"

"Well, somebody else stopped. Poor Peggy Fuller's mother. Mrs. Selby stopped for cucumbers and corn at ten-twenty."

"Which way was she going?"

"East. I couldn't tell if she took the Waunona road or the Greenridge road after she left here. I guess I might've seen which cutoff she took if that Slasher boy from the hotel hadn't got me so upset. I guess it must've been to Waunona because she'd have passed her own daughter with that stranger on the Greenridge road. She never did say anything about passing them or seeing young Alex Fuller already dead, so I guess she went to Waunona that morning. I've often thought about it, how she just missed seeing her own daughter by inches. Another few minutes might've meant the difference between life and death."

"What about the Slasher boy? How did he upset you?"

"Oh, him. He came roaring by on his motorcycle just as Mrs. Selby pulled away from here. She wasn't here more than three or four minutes. Then that nasty Slasher boy roared by and almost ran over one of my chickens. It raised such a squawk I got all flustered."

"Which way was Slasher going?"

"Back to the lake. I don't know if he'd come from Greenridge or Waunona. Disgusting young jackanapes! My niece has told me about him. They had trouble with him at the high school, snooping around the girls' gym when they were dressing and such. I hear he had to get rid of his motorcycle. It certainly don't surprise me any."

"You say Peggy Fuller and the stranger went past you at ten twenty-seven?"

She nodded and patted her hair.

"Was there any more traffic until Newsom stopped here?"

"Well, no—no, that was all. . . ." Then she frowned. "I'm wrong about that. There was Mr. Garth at ten-thirty."

"Garth?"

"Langdon Garth. One of our most important residents. He went by in his foreign car when the programs were changing at ten-thirty, going toward Greenridge or Waunona, just traveling like the wind. He waved to me when he went by. There wasn't a soul after that until Mr. Newsom at eleven."

"Nobody else at all? Nothing else out of the ordinary happened? There isn't anything else you've thought about since?"

Eunice Barrow shook her head, frowning a little, slightly puzzled. "I don't understand. What else was there to think about? There wasn't any mystery about how those poor young folks got killed. I was asked questions at the inquest, but nothing like this."

Her puzzlement indicated it was time to end the interview.

"Well, thanks very much, Miss Barrow. You've been very helpful. I won't take up any more of your time."

Out of sight of the stand, Ross drew off the highway and jotted down the names and times she had given him. Whether accurate or not, her schedule changed matters for him. Now he had a clearer picture of that August morning. Not only Chuck but persons close to the Fullers had been in the immediate area of both murders. It meant he had to check the times at which they passed the roadside

stand, then he had to try to place them on the Greenridge road and on the state highway. Where had Martha Selby and Slop Slasher and Langdon Garth and Karen James gone after they passed the stand? All were suspects. Even Karen was a suspect. He had to investigate all of them.

In town he parked outside the malt shop near the Vista Motel and went inside for coffee and Wisconsin Swiss on rye.

It was two-thirty when he drove to the hotel. A tall, lanky man in a gray suit came down the veranda steps and ducked inside a new black sedan. He swung around Ross as Ross walked toward the steps. Under limp, iron-gray hair combed back from a bony forehead his face was thin, almost gaunt, with a long spade-shaped jaw gashed midway by the dour lines of his mouth.

MacFarland emerged from the lobby before Ross reached the veranda. The black eye patch gave him a rakish look. He came down the steps and gave Ross a rolling punch on the arm.

"Find out anything, pal?"

"A few things," Ross said. "Who was that?"

"The local gestapo chief. That's W. C. Pollard."

"What's he doing here?"

"Checking up on Wad Brown."

"You mean LaVerne Gilman's under suspicion?"

"Everybody's under suspicion, Nichols. There wasn't anybody who liked Brown. Pollard even got tough with me."

"Why you, for God's sake?"

"Just on general principles. He made it plain I'm still not in the clear. But it happens to be bluff. He's already got his number-one suspect to track down."

"Who's that?"

"Slop Slasher," said Mac. "Slop's nowhere around. He's disappeared."

For the rest of the day there were no new developments in the Brown case. At the hotel, where LaVerne Gilman remained in seclusion, MacFarland went to bed early and promptly fell asleep. In the morning he did his usual chores and then started mending screens on the back porch.

Ross joined him shortly before eleven. While they talked, the lake glinted and sparkled in the morning sunlight. The launch bumped gently against the pier stakes.

"Nichols, there's only one thing wrong with what you've found out," Mac said. "In words of one syllable, what can you do with it?" Taking his cigarette from his mouth, he placed it beside the tin shears on the porch steps. "With Brown dead, what's the percentage in snooping around? It's Brown who killed Chuck. You can't do a bloody thing to him now."

Ross watched him pick up the shears and snip a small square patch of wire mesh from the sheet of copper screening between his feet. "I can still prove Chuck was framed."

Mac fitted the patch over a jagged hole worn through the screen window leaning against the porch railing. Other screens, already mended, were stacked against the wall. He threaded a single wire through patch and screen and then paused to rub his right eye with his free hand.

"How far do you think you can get with your suspects and that timetable, son? Where you figure to start?"

"I intended to start with Slop Slasher. You said he was on the verge of talking about the Fuller case on Sunday. With Eunice Barrow's information about him not coming out at the inquest, I thought I'd spring it on him and surprise him."

"Slop's out until they catch him now."

"You think he killed Brown?"

"I wouldn't know, pal. Pollard's issued a hold-for-questioning order on him, but nobody knows when he blew town. Personally, for my dough, Brown was pretty big for Slop to handle."

"Not if Brown was drunk," Ross said. "It's also a question of provocation. Even a woman could kill someone Brown's size if she's angry or frightened enough."

"LaVerne, maybe?" Mac shook his head. "It wasn't Madam Gilman, pal. Believe me, she's got an alibi. I only hope she don't have to use it."

The wooden walk around the corner of the building resounded with the rise and fall of footsteps.

When Arch Gilman rounded the corner, they saw he had been drinking. It was a full hour before noon, but the loose-gaited movements of his soft, spreading body betrayed his drunkenness. His hair looked uncombed; his white shirt was grubby about the collar and cuffs. He nodded briefly at Ross and then addressed MacFarland on the porch.

"How ya comin'? Almost finished?"

Mac picked up his cigarette. "Just about."

"Got somethin' else for ya right now. Do it myself, oney I'm expectin' Pollard to come over about Slop."

"Anything new come up?"

"I dunno. Pollard didn't say." Gilman dug into his pocket and pulled out a key ring and a crumpled five-dollar bill. "I got an order to pick up at Maxie's. A suit an' stuff. This oughta cover it. Take the car."

"Okay," Mac said. "The minute I finish up here."

Gilman belched, standing irresolute on the walk. Then he turned unsteadily and lumbered around the building.

Mac rose to his feet. "Like to go along, pal?"

"There's nothing much I can do here," Ross said. "You can drop me off at the Blairs' later."

When they drove along Main Street, the cyclists were abroad in growing numbers. The summer season had begun in earnest over the week end. The hotel veranda was thronged with rocking oldsters, and Main Street was alive with girls in shorts and bras, middle-aged women in slacks, youths in swim trunks and tennis shoes. The stolid business section had an incongruous carnival air, as though the store fronts were a satirical backdrop for a modern ballet. Even the brilliant sunshine seemed unreal, insistently gilt, like artificial light.

In front of the cleaner's they halted at the curb to let a pair of girl cyclists wobble past them in a flurry of squeals and giggles. Then they crossed the busy sidewalk to the store entrance. The electric fan still fluttered the small American flag in the window. They glanced at the lettered card still leaning against the standard and then shrugged in unison.

Inside the store Max Gershowitz stepped forward to meet them behind his work counter. Ross had met him while shopping with Nina Blair, but it was the first time Mac had seen the old man. He was frail and stooped, with thin hair combed in gray wisps across his fragile skull. His gray eyes blinked behind thick-lensed glasses. Knotted tendons moved like corded ropes under the liver-spotted skin drawn taut over his big hands.

"Good morning, Mr. Nichols!"

"Hello, Mr. Gershowitz."

"I was hoping to see you, Mr. Nichols. That is a very remarkable thing you have made out of *Hamlet*."

Ross grinned. "Just how do you mean that?"

"Young man, everybody has his own Shakespeare. For example, is your Shylock my Shylock? If in Shakespeare's time there were no Jews in all of England, how could he know his Shylock? But your Hamlet I could accept last night. You made me see modern man has his roots far, far back, and perhaps he foreshadows, too, what is ahead of us."

"I think you'd better thank Shakespeare for that."

"Not only Shakespeare! Many years ago in Warsaw I see other Hamlets. They are all color and noise, strutting around the stage like so many peacocks. You showed me man struggling against his destiny. That is something I did not see before. You know like I know that man climbs upward and goes forward only when he tries to do what is impossible, when he says to Fate, 'You! I don't believe you!'"

Mac tossed a dime in his hand, watching it spin in a beam of sunlight. "I'd better stay out of this discussion. I kept rooting for Hamlet to get the girl. I guess I'm a sucker for a happy ending."

The old man turned cordially. "Would we all not like happy endings?"

"I'm ready to vote them in," Mac said. "In the meantime I'd like to pick up Arch Gilman's order."

The smile disappeared, like a smiling chalk face removed from a blackboard with the smear of an eraser. All friendliness was gone. In its place was a cold, bleak, negative quality. Neither suspicion nor resentment, it was intangible. Between them was a sudden void which nothing could bridge.

"I don't know what all's in it," Mac said casually. "A suit and something else, I guess."

The old man shuffled to the back of the store and lifted his hands to the racks of cleaned and pressed garments. He removed a tan seersucker suit from its hook and covered it with a paper hood and brought it back to the counter. Then he stooped and brought forth a neatly folded American flag from under the shelf.

Mac frowned. "Did Gilman get this cleaned again?"

"With every cleaning order. It is the offer I make."

"That louse. That lousy, stinking—"

"The bill is a dollar nineteen."

Mac took out the five-dollar bill Gilman had given him. "How about the flag?"

"The flag is free. All American flags are cleaned free with every order."

"But not like this one. You don't find many flags this size. This is the giant, patriotic-institution size."

The old man stood silent, impassive, resigned.

"How much does it cost to clean a flag like this?"

"Excuse me, but that is not the point. I make my offer. I must keep my word."

"Five dollars cover it?"

"The price does not matter. I must carry out my part of the bargain."

Mac took a second bill from his other pocket. "We don't like it that way. Here's another five bucks."

"Please," said the old man. "I couldn't let you."

"Why not?"

"Gentlemen, please, I can't let you! It would only make trouble!"

"Why would it? I'm paying for it." When the bony hands began to tremble involuntarily on the counter, Mac spoke with strange roughness. "Look, pal. Get this. I may work for Gilman, but I've got my own ideas about my fellow man. They don't happen to coincide with Gilman's alleged thoughts on the subject." He put the money on the counter, tucked the folded flag under his arm, and picked up the suit by its wire hanger. "Now take that and forget you've got it."

Ross went outside with him to the car.

"You were too rough on him, MacFarland. You should've been more diplomatic."

"I know. He's scared. But there's more than this flag-cleaning behind his funk. Something else is going on." Mac put the car roughly into first, disregarding the pained protest of the racing motor. "I don't know, Nichols. I've got an idea I'm washed up with Lake Nausea. I'm ready to quit."

"I'm not."

"You aim to start reforming the local rabble?"

"I'm not even thinking about that. I still mean to find out the truth about Chuck."

"Which means I have to stick around," Mac said. "I wonder what Gershowitz thinks about Brown's killing." Then, scowling, he rubbed his eye. "Or should I wonder what he knows?"

He dropped Ross off at the Blairs', waved to Buzzie and Cissie playing on the lawn, and then returned to the hotel.

Arch Gilman stood behind the reception desk.

"Maxie say anything?"

"Not a word."

"Yeah?" Gilman surveyed the folded flag with bloodshot eyes. "Maxie sure got stung when he went patriotic on us."

MacFarland let the words go past him. He went out to the side porch and finished working on the screens and fitted them on the rear second-floor windows. LaVerne Gilman was still out of sight. At last he was finished. He put the ladder and his tools away and went back to the lobby.

"Take over the desk," said Gilman. "Pollard can't get over here. I dunno when I'll be back."

An hour elapsed before the newcomer appeared in the lobby. Tall and thin, in his early twenties, he had heavy-lidded eyes under a hooded brow, an unassertive jaw below a wide, loose mouth. He moved toward the desk with a hurried, awkward gait.

"Arch Gilman?"

"Gilman's out," Mac said. "He went out a little while ago."

"Are you sure?"

Mac jerked his head up for a hasty reply. The newcomer was trembling, barely under control, less from fear than in rage. Mac relaxed, looking at his visitor with new interest.

"You related to Max Gershowitz?"

"I'm his nephew." His speech bore only traces of an accent. "I just came into town."

"I thought so," Mac said. "I guess you're here about that flag-cleaning stunt."

"I don't know that we have anything to say to one another."

"Come off it, will you? I'm trying to help you."

"The way you've helped my uncle?"

"I'm not Gilman, pal. My name's MacFarland. I've already told your uncle——"

"MacFarland?" The other shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry. Max told me about you and Nichols. I'm David Gershowitz."

Mac adjusted his eye patch. "Maybe we can talk sense now. What makes you think you'd get anywhere coming in here to raise hell with Gilman? He's a louse and a loudmouth. You can't fight him by losing your temper. The thing to do is tell your uncle to withdraw his flag offer."

"He'd never do that. Max has his own kind of pride. His own love for this country too. Besides, there's something else now." David Gershowitz took a torn scrap of notebook paper from his pocket. "Tell me what you think of this."

The message was crudely scrawled at a sloping angle against the lines of the ruled page.

Get out of town you lousey forriner bastard before I tare
out yore tung an beet you to deth with it.

Mac looked at him. "You think Gilman's behind this?"

"Can you name anybody else?"

Mac shrugged. "Is this the first one?"

"No. Three others."

"What does your uncle expect you to do?"

"He doesn't know I came here about it."

"What did you think you could do? Were you planning to slug Gilman?" Mac waited. "You ever slug anybody before?"

"In spite of everything Max suffered from the Nazis in Poland—well, I'm not exactly an advocate of force and violence——"

"I didn't think so." Mac grunted. "Look, pal. If you're going to stick around, don't go off half cocked. Get in touch with me or Nichols first. We've got some ideas of our own about this place."

"What kind of ideas?"

"About Wad Brown."

David Gershowitz was unable to conceal his reaction. His face reddened. He touched his tongue to dry lips.

"What does your uncle think about Brown? Does he have any ideas about who killed him?"

"Why should he?"

"Brown was a bigger louse than Gilman. You can't tell me he didn't roust your uncle one way or another."

David Gershowitz nodded unhappily. "As a matter of fact, Max first thought Brown was responsible for these anonymous notes. Now he knows it couldn't've been Brown. This last one was post-marked after Brown was found dead."

"Mind if I keep it?"

"I don't think that's necessary."

"How'd your uncle come to settle in Lake Teresa?"

"Relatives who left Poland years ago used to live here. They moved to Chicago last year, and I went away to school, but Max stayed on. It was as good a place as any until recently." The younger man glanced quickly away, distracted by a middle-aged couple coming downstairs from the second floor. "Well, thanks, MacFarland. I'll get in touch with you."

In the evening MacFarland went out. His need for physical action drew him to the bowling alleys on Main Street. With Ross busy at the playhouse, bowling seemed as good an antidote as any for boredom.

It was after eleven when Mac returned to the hotel. The lobby was empty. Arch Gilman sat half dozing behind the reception desk. They nodded curtly at one another. Mac left Gilman slapping at a night moth fluttering about the green-shaded desk lamp and went upstairs to his room. He unlocked the door and flicked the light switch with his nail and then stood still.

LaVerne Gilman was sitting on the bed, waiting for him. She had exchanged her white smock for a flowered-print housecoat.

Mac closed the door. "Do you feel all right? Don't you know he's downstairs?" He watched her rise from the bed. Her face

emerged into full focus as she came to him. "My God, woman, where'd you get the shiner?"

Her right eye was swollen, surrounded by a yellowing purple bruise. "Where were you?" Under her gray-streaked hair her face was haggard, intense. Her hands were clenched at her sides. "Where were you?"

"Where do you think I was?"

"If you're fooling around with some other——"

"Shove it, baby. You don't hold a first mortgage on me."

"No? How long you think you can keep your job here?"

"You threatening me, doll? You can take your job and——"

Instantly she was contrite. "I didn't mean that. I got crazy, waiting for you." Her arms went around his neck. "Monkey . . ."

"Take it easy. You don't want to start anything with Arch downstairs. He might come up any time."

"He won't." She pulled his head down, trying to kiss him. "He figures I won't try anything funny now he's hit me. He don't know how wrong he is."

"Why'd he wallop you?"

"That damn Pollard," she said bitterly. "He told Arch he found some stuff in Wad's wallet that referred to me."

"What kind of stuff?"

"How do I know? Arch just let me have it wham in the eye."

"Does Pollard have anything new about Brown?"

"That hawkshaw?" she asked scornfully. "Arch won't say anything, but I figure Slop did it. All they have to do is catch up with Slop, and it's all over with."

"You sound like you're grieving, cookie."

"Wad's dead. You're alive. Who has fun with a dead man?"

She pinched his ear lobe between her nails. He pulled her against him. She laughed softly, clinging to him. He groped behind him with his free hand and turned the key in the lock and then found the light switch.

"Remind me to send you a note in the morning," he said in

the dark. "I'm going to start claiming time and a half for over-time."

11

THE library was a quiet, cool tomb in the radiant morning heat. No one stirred inside the brick-and-stucco building on the oak-shaded avenue behind the courthouse. The muffled, deliberate beat of the wall clock was the only sound while Ross read over his notes in the farthest corner of the deserted reading room, trying again to decide on his course of action.

Where did he start? Whom could he talk to? With Newsom gone since December, and now with Slop Slasher gone, what was he left with?

He picked up his pencil and began to check off his notes.

1. Both Fullers killed between 10 and 10:45.
2. Alex Fuller killed before 10:27, when Eunice Barrow saw Peggy Fuller go by with Chuck. Or was Fuller already dead at that time? Assumption based on official story that Chuck killed him. Was young Fuller necessarily dead at 10:27?
3. Wad Brown shot Chuck at 10:58. Alex Fuller dead at that time; body found by Newsom, who was at Eunice Barrow's by 11.
4. Actual suspects: Martha Selby, Slop Slasher, Langdon Garth, Karen James. All four in immediate area. Either Selby or Garth could kill Alex, but not Peggy. How about other two? What motives?
5. Why was Peggy Fuller in Chuck's car? Why was she shot with his gun?

Only stubbornness prevented him from losing faith in his original premise. He refused to believe Chuck could be guilty. Charles Vinson, rapist, murderer—it was unthinkable. But why had Peggy Fuller been riding with him? How could the use of his gun be explained away? It was impossible to reach even a partial explanation.

At last he stuffed his notes into his pocket and went outside. He stood on the library steps for a moment, blinking against the glare. He had pedaled downtown on Julian's bicycle. The thought of cycling back in the baking heat was uninviting, but there was no other alternative. He raked his hand through his hair and started down the steps.

"Hi!"

Karen James was smiling at him when he looked up. The convertible had drawn to a stop beside the rack at the curb. She was wearing a white blouse and white shorts.

"Hi," he said. "Anyone for tennis?"

"Oh, this," she said. "I simply wanted something cool and respectable to wear downtown." She leaned toward the door on his side. "Can I give you a lift?"

He nodded at the slatted rack. "I'm going home, but I've got Julian's bike."

"Put it in back," she said promptly. "It's silly to pedal home in this heat."

As they drove away from the library, he found himself comparing her again with Doreen. It was the first time he had seen her since early Monday morning, when she had driven him home from the Selby reception. He knew Nina had talked to her on the telephone about the Brown case, but Nina had remained uncommunicative. He wondered whether it was time to find an opening.

"I just saw Mac," she said. "He was buying some hardware for the hotel. I'd stopped to get some weed killer."

"Oh?" He decided the opening had arrived. "Did Mac say anything about Wad Brown?"

"Mmmm?"

"Well, Slop Slasher——"

"Oh . . ." Her manner seemed abruptly hesitant, reluctant. "No, Mac didn't say anything." She turned the corner. "I wonder where Slop disappeared."

"Maybe he didn't."

"Mmmm?"

"Maybe Slop's dead too."

The suggestion seemed to disconcert her. "Do you mean Pollard thinks that——"

"I don't know about him. I only say it's a possibility."

"But wouldn't that mean Wad Brown's killer also killed Slop Slasher?"

"Not necessarily. Wad Brown could've killed Slasher. Then someone else killed Brown." He grinned as her nose wrinkled in puzzlement. "You don't have to accept my thesis. It's only one possibility among many."

Karen slowed for a pedestrian. "I don't even like to think about it. I hate the thought of murder."

"So does Nina," Ross said casually. "She says this case reminds her too much of her brother's murder."

He watched her fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

"I can appreciate how Nina feels," he went on. "I understand it happened less than a year ago."

"Yes." Her voice was taut, shallow. "Just last August."

"What were the Fullers really like?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, they seemed young—not an enemy in the world——"

"I imagine we all have enemies of some kind. I don't like Martha Selby, for instance. I'm sure she doesn't like me."

"Why the antipathy?"

"I really don't know. I've never been able to analyze my own feelings toward her."

"What did Nina think about her brother's wife? If Peggy Selby was anything like her mother or her brother——"

"She wasn't. She was—well—cute and lively."

"Which one was killed first?"

"Dad conducted the autopsies. He said it was impossible to establish the exact time of death. That's always true in such cases. Wad Brown, for example. Dad told me he thought Brown was killed around two or three in the morning. He found strong traces of cognac in the digestive tract, which meant Brown had been drinking heavily, but the time of death could be estimated only approximately because the gastric juices carry on the process of digestion for a period after death."

"Did your father notice anything unusual in the Fuller case?"

"I don't know," she said nervously. "I'd rather not talk about it." Her voice sharpened aggrievedly. "I wish you hadn't brought it up. Nobody ever talks about it now. It's something we prefer to forget."

They drove on in silence to the Blair bungalow. The white picket fence was draped with various small items of clothing. Evidently Cissie had been indulging in her favorite pastime of disrobing in public. They sat silent for a moment after the convertible came to a halt.

"Would you like to come in?"

"I don't really have time. I'll call Nina later."

The convertible turned the corner on protesting rubber.

Ross stood at the gate, frowning. Why was she so upset by talk about the Fullers? What had he started to open up? He shrugged and then wheeled Julian's bicycle into the garage and leaned it against the wall beside the Blairs' coupé.

Cissie and Buzzie were eating their lunch when he entered the house from the rear.

"I'm going to see Grampa!" Stuffing his cheek with cottage cheese and soda cracker, Buzzie beat time with his fork on the table. "Going to see Grampa, going to see Grampa!"

"Hush, now," Nina scolded. "Be quiet and drink your milk like a good little character."

"Going to see Grampa, going to see Grampa!"

"Not Grampa!" Cissie struggled with a section of sliced tomato, dripping with seeds and juice. "Gramma! We're going to see Gramma, aren't we, Mommy?"

"Both, dear. You're going to stay with both of them. Daddy'll take you there tomorrow morning."

Julian had already announced his intention to drive the children to their grandparents in Cedar Falls, a town some sixty miles to the northwest.

"Will I have fun!" said Buzzie. "I'll have a new baby brother when I get back, Ross, did you know that? I bet you didn't know it, did you, Ross?"

"Me too," said Cissie. "Won't I have a baby brother, Mommy?"

"They may run out of baby brothers," Nina warned mildly. "Maybe they'll have only girls left in stock."

"Well, I like boys," said Buzzie. "Do you like boys, Cissie?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded vigorously. "I like girls. Don't I like girls, Mommy?"

"Not girls!" her brother hooted. "Boys!" His round face beamed at Ross. "My baby brother'll come in a anjalance!"

"Not anjalance," Cissie corrected primly. "Amberlance."

Listening to their wrangling, content to chuckle on the sidelines as a spectator, Ross began to realize the change they had brought about in him. He had felt rootless since childhood, always at odds with his background. Despite the demands of the play and his concern about Chuck, it had taken the artless chatter of Cissie and Buzzie to create an oasis of quietude for him.

After lunch he went outside to the front porch, watching the children gallop and tumble and wrestle on the lawn. His thoughts still centered about his notes, but he still felt baffled, unable to resolve his confusion. In a little while Nina joined him with her knitting. She sat down in her favorite chair, smoothing back a loose strand of hair from her forehead. Her body was awkward and bloated, but her face still had a pert, scrubbed look.

"Look at those imps," she said. "Who'd ever think it took Cissie sixteen hours to put in her appearance? By that time, of course, Julie was limp with terror. I was merely limp." She deftly recovered a dropped stitch. "Why don't you settle down and start raising babies, Nichols?"

"I understand you need a partner and a license before you can start production."

Nina looked at him quizzically with half-closed eyes and tilted chin. "Well?"

"When that happens, I'll be a long way from here."

"The professional runner-awayer," she said. "Just for that, I ought to make you go downtown and do some shopping for me. Maybe you'd run into Karen and become a little more cheerful."

"I've already seen her. She drove me home."

"Oh? Why didn't she drop in?"

"I don't know. We got to talking about Wad Brown and then about your brother. The next thing I knew she was pretty upset." After waiting for Nina to comment, he had to fill the gap. "Why would that disturb her?"

"I think she was in love with Alex," Nina said quietly. "I'm pretty sure Alex was in love with her, but they were both too shy to do anything about it. Alex wasn't like me, you see. He wasn't the extrovert type. I think he was just about the gentlest person I ever knew."

"What was his wife like?"

"She's dead now, Ross. I'd rather not talk about her."

"Why not?"

For the first time in their relationship Nina seemed to freeze and withdraw from him. It was a curious sensation. She still knitted quietly beside him, but a barrier seemed to come between them.

"How did the Selbys like their daughter's marriage?"

"They didn't. They never accepted Alex. They certainly don't like me." Nina sighed and put down her knitting. "Well, there's

nothing we can do about it now. I wish you'd do that shopping for me, Nichols. Julie dropped the car off for me, but I don't feel up to going out now."

The tourists were everywhere when he drove downtown. They had invaded Lake Teresa in a restless horde as June ended in a series of warm, cloudless days. Even the Lakeside Hotel was filled. The newcomers moved with lazy amiability under the tricolored bunting strung from the light standards for the annual Independence Day celebration.

Nina had ordered stamps, groceries, tooth paste, and a suit to be picked up at the cleaner's.

As he left the post office, he barely avoided colliding with Edgar Selby. It was an unexpected encounter. Selby's weak, bland face flushed as they side-stepped one another. They nodded briefly. Selby went inside, letter in hand.

On the sidewalk Ross found Martha Selby talking to Langdon Garth. The thin, loose-mouthed woman seemed to have been babbling away with nervous intensity for some time. Garth looked over her shoulder at Ross with evident relief.

"Hello there, Nichols." His handclasp was firm and confident. "We were just talking about you. I was asking if you were going to direct the rest of the season. Mrs. Selby seems to think the matter hasn't been settled as yet."

The full brown eyes regarded the big-shouldered man with their queer intensity. "That depends upon the board, of course."

"And Mr. Nichols," Garth suggested dryly.

"Oh, of course!" She lifted her hand to her untidy hair. "As I was saying, however, I'm going away for two days. We won't be able to convene the board until I get back."

Edgar Selby rejoined them on the sidewalk. Garth seemed to relish the moment of awkward silence that enveloped them. His big, brooding presence appeared to heighten the Selbys' discomfort. Ross thought of his new timetable, wondering about Martha Selby and Langdon Garth.

Edgar Selby cleared his throat. "Well, my dear—"

"It's my day to shop," Ross said. "I have to get back."

He walked briskly away, past Curley's Drug Store, past the turning barber pole adjoining Max Gershowitz's store front.

When he entered the cleaning-and-dyeing shop, Max Gershowitz was talking to a youth in his early twenties. The old man seemed more bent and frail than ever. His myopic eyes blinked weakly behind his black-rimmed bifocals.

"Mr. Nichols! It is nice to see you."

"Hello. I'd like to get the suit Mr. Blair left here."

"Yes, yes, of course . . ." The old man turned away from the counter, then looked back hesitantly, nodding his head in a nervous, half-completed gesture. "You have met my nephew?"

"I don't think so."

"David, come here, please. I want you should meet Mr. Nichols."

"Glad to meet you, Nichols." David Gershowitz spoke with a shallow, throaty voice. "I caught your *Hamlet* last night. Pretty impressive for a summer-theater production."

"Thanks. Glad you liked it."

"I'm not sure I liked it. You impressed me, but I can't say you made me agree with you."

"Nobody ever expects total agreement," Ross said. "MacFarland told me about you, by the way. . . ." The old man was out of earshot, seeking Julian's suit in the loaded racks at the back of the store. "Has your uncle received any more communiqués?"

"What?"

"Those notes." Ross felt baffled by the blank face. "The anonymous letters . . ."

"I don't know what you mean."

Ross frowned. "Mac told me about—"

"My uncle's perfectly happy here. No one molests him."

"But Mac said—"

The old man approached the counter, the suit over his arm.

"He's received no notes," David Gershowitz said quietly. "Tell

your friend so, please. I wouldn't like to think he's spreading any false rumors."

His impassive countenance contained the same finality with which Max Gershowitz had met Mac's self-introduction as Arch Gilman's employee. There was no way the wall between them could be breached. Ross paid for the suit and went outside and then stood on the pavement in the bright sunlight, swearing quietly and thoroughly, with an earnestness born of frustration.

12

THAT NIGHT Ross drove home from the playhouse with Hamlet and Polonius. He had been unable to reach Mac at the hotel, and for the first time Karen James had stayed at home. The performance had been an improvement over opening night. He felt content to ride in silence, engrossed in his own thoughts, while the two in the front seat talked about baseball, the draft situation, the girls each knew in Waunona and Greenridge.

What course was he to take? Where did he start?

The sedan slid to a halt outside the white picket fence.

"Thanks, Dick. See you tomorrow."

"Okay, Ross. G'night."

As he opened the gate, he noticed the new black sedan parked on the side driveway leading back to the garage. It had a familiar look, but he was too deep in introspection to stop consciously to identify it. Evidently the Blairs had company. He considered going inside through the kitchen to avoid meeting their guests, but then he realized the back door in all probability was locked. He would have to face Julian and Nina and their guests, even though briefly.

When he stepped inside the house, he found William Pollard sitting on the divan facing the entrance hall. The chief of police

gazed at him unsmilingly, gaunt, long-nosed; his iron-gray hair complemented and accented his gray sharkskin suit. Julian and Nina sat in separate chairs. They looked toward the opening door with unaccustomed gravity.

"Nichols?" Pollard's voice was curiously toneless, flat as a mechanical simulation of a human voice. "My name's Pollard. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Momentarily Ross hesitated. Then he gathered his forces to combat the impalpable hostility he sensed in the room. He reached for a cigarette and lighted it before answering.

"What's this about, Mr. Pollard? What do you want to know?"

"I reckon you know I'm head of the police department here. I've already been talking to Blair and his wife. They tell me they don't know too much about you."

"None of us knows much about each other," Ross said. "None of us has had much time for gossip since I came to town."

The electric blue eyes in the lean, dour face surveyed him in piercing interrogation. They were curiously bright eyes, cold and hard as highly polished glass.

"Just who are you, Nichols? What're you doing here?"

"Is that the type of question you usually put to newcomers in your community?"

Pollard looked at him with cold hostility. His long, sharp-winged nose twitched nervously. He rubbed the back of his hand across its thin tip.

"I ask every kind of question when somebody's been murdered, Nichols. I'm asking you who you are."

Ross shrugged. "I'm from Monterey, California. I came back from Korea and got out of the service about six weeks ago. I came into town with D. J. MacFarland, who currently works at the Lakeside Hotel. I've just directed a production for the community playhouse. I hope that satisfies your curiosity."

"It don't, mister." Pollard combed skeletal fingers through his long gray hair. "I want to know how come you asked Eunice Bar-

row so many questions the day Wad Brown was found murdered."

From the stolid silence shared by Nina and Julian it was evident Pollard had already mentioned Eunice Barrow to them.

"Did Miss Barrow tell you about me?"

"I went out to see if she'd noticed any strangers on the highway. She told me about you. She got kind of worried after she found out Wad Brown was dead."

"Why should she? What connection does she see between Brown's murder and the Fuller case?"

"You tell me, Nichols. You asked Miz Barrow all them questions about Alex and Peggy Fuller. You did it after you already knew Wad Brown was dead."

"That's all within my rights as a private citizen." Ross watched the pinch-cornered mouth tighten. "What are you trying to prove, Mr. Pollard?"

"Can you account for your time early Monday morning?"

Ross looked at Julian and Nina. Both were expressionless. He turned back to Pollard.

"After the opening-night performance I attended a reception at the Selbys'. I left with Miss James, who drove me home. I arrived here about two-thirty."

"Can you prove it?"

"We-ell, Miss James—" Ross looked sharply at the thin man on the divan. "Do you mean to tell me you think I had something to do with Wad Brown's murder?"

"Neither Blair nor his wife heard you come in. Maybe you didn't get in until three-thirty or four-thirty."

"Miss James can tell you the time she dropped me off at the house," Ross said evenly. "Or is she under suspicion too?"

Pollard ignored his question. "You told Eunice Barrow you were an insurance investigator. I'd like to see your credentials."

Ross had been waiting for the request. He knew a certain relief when he heard it. The decision he had been debating had been forced on him.

"Well?" said Pollard. "Let's see them."

Ross still delayed answering. Nina and Julian were still silent, their faces blank. He regretted the way in which his real identity was being revealed to them. He knew it would seem like the worst kind of ingratitude. He would seem guilty of cynical betrayal of their unqualified acceptance of him as their guest and their friend.

"I don't have those credentials," he said slowly. "I came to Lake Teresa for purposes of investigation, but purely for personal reasons. Wad Brown shot and killed Charles Vinson last August. Charles Vinson was my brother."

Nina uttered a tiny gasp, barely audible, her hand to her mouth. Julian's face whitened behind his glasses. His straight, blunt mouth set in an uncompromising line.

"Chuck was my half brother," Ross went on. "That explains our difference in names, if that bothers you." He continued to look at Pollard, but he was addressing Nina and Julian. "Chuck was killed while I was in Korea. I knew nothing about it until I got home. Then my mother told me. She still hasn't recovered from the shock and the shame of it. She couldn't believe her son could be guilty of murder. Neither did I. I came here to find out the truth."

Nina stirred unhappily in her chair. "Ross, we know the truth! All the evidence—the gun—the paint scratches on the two cars——"

"I still don't believe it. Chuck wasn't a murderer."

Julian leaned forward in grim earnestness. "Why didn't you go to the authorities with your doubts, Ross? Why come into town and move into our house under false pretenses?"

Ross had no answer for him. It was the reproach he had expected. He knew he deserved it. He found it hard to look at either Julian or Nina.

"I'll tell you one thing right now," Pollard said in his flat, toneless voice. "Vinson was guilty. I never seen anybody more guilty than he was."

"Brown shot my brother before anybody even knew Alex Fuller

and his wife were dead. There were no witnesses to either murder. Your case was purely circumstantial."

Julian shook his head. "Ross, that's not so. Eunice Barrow saw Peggy Fuller in your brother's car, and she identified him as the driver. That's not circumstantial."

"She didn't witness either killing. Nobody did."

Nina gestured unhappily. "We know how you feel, Ross. I wouldn't want to believe Alex or Julie could be guilty of murder either. But these things happen. I guess the potentials are in all of us, no matter what we're like ordinarily."

Ross sat silent, unwilling to talk freely while Pollard was present. It was obvious the thin, gaunt man would tell him nothing. He had no desire to reveal anything to Pollard.

"You had Wad Brown tabbed for a killer before you ever came to town, didn't you, Nichols?" The long, spade-shaped jaw jutted out suspiciously. "What kind of snooping did you and MacFarland do about Wad?"

"MacFarland? What's he got to do with it?"

"He was asking questions about Wad soon as he got his job at the hotel. Hazel Bishop, Slop Slasher, Mrs. Gilman, they all say so. Pretty pointed questions, too, according to the womenfolk."

"How do you know Mac talked to Slasher?"

"Hazel Bishop said so." Pollard stood up from the divan in awkward angularity. "You and your friend better stick around, Nichols. Don't kid yourself you're both in the clear."

Julian rose from his chair. "Is that all, Chief?"

"That's all for now. Thanks for your trouble, ma'am. G'night, all."

The living room was quiet after the sedan started up outside and then backed down the driveway into the street. No one moved while the car drove noisily away, shattering the quiet darkness. Nina still sat in her chair, staring unhappily into space. Julian remained at the door, grave and aloof.

"Well, now you know," Ross said quietly. "I'll get my things together and get out."

There was no response to his announcement. He moved toward the hallway leading back to the bedrooms. Then Nina put up her hand in a tentative little gesture, stopping him.

"Ross, wait. You won't find a place to stay at this hour."

"I can't stay here. I had no right to take advantage of you in the first place."

Julian shook his head. "Nina's right. We can't just throw you out. You'll have to get out, naturally, but not until you find another place to stay. You can do that tomorrow."

Ross hesitated and then shrugged. "All right. That makes sense. I'll get out tomorrow."

Again silence enveloped them. All the unstudied acceptance of one another which had marked their association was destroyed. In its place was the rough awkwardness of betrayal, resentment, suspicion.

"Look, just one more thing," Ross said abruptly. "I know you've both gone over and over what happened last August. You must've reconstructed the two killings in your own minds. I'd like to know how you visualize the sequence of events. You're positive Chuck's guilty, but I still don't think so. I'd appreciate hearing your version of what happened."

Julian returned his gaze with level eyes, glanced at Nina, and then looked back at him. "I don't think that'll do any good, Ross. It'll only upset Nina, and in her present condition——"

"No, Julie. Tell him." Nina seemed strangely solemn, almost staid, like a child determined to behave with grown-up earnestness. "We owe it to him, Julie. Go ahead, honey."

Julian still hesitated. His eyes blinked behind his glasses. He rubbed his knuckles against his cheek. Then he went to the end table beside the divan and picked up his pipe.

"Well, all right, Ross. Here's how we see it." He paused to light his pipe. "We know that Alex and Peggy left their apartment in Greenridge at ten o'clock that morning. Somewhere on the county road before they reached the Three Points cutoff they got involved

in a scrape with your brother's car. Either they'd stopped for some reason, which meant his car grazed them in passing, or maybe he overtook them and clipped them in swinging around them. Which-ever it was, both cars stopped. The two guys got into an argument. There was a fight, and Alex was killed. Your brother got panicky, forced Peggy into his car, and drove off with her. We know they were together—Eunice Barrow saw them go by. A little later Peggy tried to get away from him, or maybe he even tried to rape her—we'll never know what actually happened—and so he shot her. He dumped her body and started out in the car again, but two miles later he ran out of gas. He was still trying to figure out his next move when Wad Brown happened along on highway patrol. Your brother lost his head completely and started to run, and then—well, the rest you know."

Ross paced the floor while Julian relighted his pipe. Julian looked at him inquiringly, his lips pulling back from the pipestem as he fought to rekindle the dead dottle. Ross halted and slowly shook his head.

"I can't buy it, Julian. Chuck wasn't the type who got into arguments with strangers. He just didn't get involved in public brawls."

"He did this time."

"Why? Because Alex Fuller left him no other alternative?"

Nina broke in quickly. "It couldn't've been Alex's fault. Alex never started a fight in his life!"

"Neither did Chuck," Ross said. "So who started it? Could it have been your brother's wife?"

Nina and Julian looked at one another in silence.

"Am I being unreasonable?" Ross asked. "If we're each convinced neither man was capable of starting a fight with a stranger, then who was responsible? If Chuck actually killed your brother, Nina, isn't it likely Peggy Fuller started it?"

Nina hesitated a long time before answering. "I don't know, Ross. I wouldn't want to say."

"What was your sister-in-law like? Shy, timid, retiring?"

Nina shook her head reluctantly. "No, she was a real extrovert. She could be a spitfire when she wanted to be."

"Sounds like a euphemism."

Julian hit his pipe against his hand. "I think that's enough, Ross. I'm not going to have you upset Nina over this business. It's all over and done with. There's no way any of it can be undone. The best thing for all of us to do is to forget about it."

"My mother hasn't forgotten about it, Julian. In many ways she's a remarkably foolish woman, but she loved her son. I owe it to her to clear his name."

"How can you clear him? Facts are facts, Ross! Your brother did it, nobody else. Everybody agrees he's guilty."

"I'm a minority of one," Ross said. "I'll move out tomorrow."

13

LONG before the children began to roughhouse in their bedroom, Ross lay awake, smoking. The first tentative flutterings and chirpings of the birds approached crescendo outside his window. Far off, like droning insects in the waning darkness, transport trucks rolled along the state highway. He lay still, waiting for the day to come, thinking of the hours before him.

Obviously his relationship with the playhouse was finished. The Selbys were certain to be outraged when they learned his real identity. Even Karen James was likely to resent his deception. Pollard had instructed him to stay in town, but his continued stay could hardly be fruitful.

Despite everything Nina and Julian had said about Chuck, he still refused to accept the official verdict. Somewhere in the version Julian had outlined there had to be a fatal flaw. Chuck was incapable of murder. Someone else was guilty.

"Stickumup!"

All at once Cissie and Buzzie were in the room, still in their pajamas, tousle-haired, giggling shrilly with Comanche-like vehemence. It was the morning when Julian was to drive them to Cedar Falls. Ross pushed their brown, squirming bodies outside, closed the door on them, then yawned and stretched. It was useless to go back to bed. He slipped on slacks and sneakers and a T-shirt and went into the kitchen.

"Going to see Gramma!" Cissie chanted, running wild. "See Gramma, Gramma, Gramma!"

Buzzie took up the chant: "Grammer, Grammer! Hammer, slammer, bammer, Grammer, jammer, rammer, bammer, whammer!"

"Judas Priest . . ." Julian glared ineffectually as they raced around the kitchen. "Where do you find all your energy at this ungodly hour?"

Breakfast was a series of mishaps. Cissie spilled her orange juice over her pajamas. In reaching out to rescue the tipped glass, Julian knocked Buzzie's glass of milk to the floor. The children roared their dismay.

"All right, all right," Julian said mildly. "Nobody's hurt. Go ahead and eat your cereal."

Again they bellowed in unison.

"Now what's wrong? What's the matter, Cissie?" Unanswered, Julian turned helplessly to Buzzie. "Look, fella . . ." He was unable to cope with his son's screaming rage. "Buzzie . . ." All at once, reddening with frustrated anger, he brought his hand down on the table in a resounding blow. "Quiet!"

The dishes and glasses jumped, as though startled. The children sat in speechless surprise. Before they could gather momentum for another outburst, Nina called quietly from the bedroom, her voice gently reproachful, the voice of one still in bed and still wanting desperately to sleep. "Julian . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"Try not to make so much noise. You might wake the baby."

A gleam of curiosity suffused the children's faces.

"What baby, Daddy?"

"Who's got a baby, Daddy?"

"Never mind," Julian said grimly, his voice edged with repressed ferocity. "Eat your breakfast and get done with it. I'd like to get back from Cedar Falls before midnight."

The threat in his voice was effective. They dipped their spoons in industrious silence while he drank his coffee. In another five minutes he had them in the bathroom, getting them washed and dressed. Then he ushered them into the bedroom to say good-by to Nina.

Ross could hear them from the entrance hall.

"G'by, Mommy!"

"Good-by, darling. Be a good girl while you're away. Be sure you mind your grandmother."

"I will, Mommy. Grandmothers are old, you know it?"

"Well, not too old . . ."

"When you're old, you die."

"I don't think we need worry about that, honey."

"When you die, you turn into a skeleton."

"Grandma will be happy to know that, dear. Be sure to take care of your sister, Buzzie. She's your responsibility."

"Sure. G'by, Mommy. Let's hurry, Daddy!"

"I'll be back before five," said Julian. "You sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course, goofus. Don't worry, and tell Mother not to worry. You better go now, before they drive off without you."

Nina had packed their suitcases the night before. Ross helped to carry them down to the car, then stood at the gate with Julian while Buzzie thumped the horn button.

"I'll move out this morning," Ross said. "I'm sorry it had to end this way for us, Julian."

"Forget it." Embarrassment made Julian's voice rough and awkward. "You're a nice guy, Ross, but you should've told us."

The children waved madly from the rear window as the car pulled away. Ross saluted them from the gate, standing still until the car had disappeared under the overhanging trees. It was almost eight. The still coolness of the night still lingered in the quiet morning air.

Tempted to go back into the house for coffee, he changed his mind. His bag was already packed. He went into the garage for Julian's bicycle. He could see about a reservation at the Vista Motel and then come back for his suitcase.

At the motel he engaged a single cabin and then stopped at the Lakeside Hotel to tell Mac about the new developments.

"Well, who's surprised?" Mac said, stirring paint. "It was sure to happen sooner or later."

"Has Pollard told you to stay in town?"

"Not in so many words. That's only a bluff, pal. Slasher's the one he wants for Brown's rub-out. I have a hunch that punk knew plenty about Brown. Pollard aims to make himself look important by messing around with us until Slop gets picked up."

An hour later Ross returned to the bungalow to pick up his suitcase. The ride home was hot and dusty. Perspiration covered him in a sticky film when he reached the house. He let the bicycle down on the grass at the gate, then walked slowly up the walk, favoring his knee after his long ride.

The moment he entered the hall he knew something was wrong. Premonition brushed across his nerve ends. He tried to stifle it. The next instant he knew his instincts had been right.

"Ross!" The sound was less his name than a groan, a whimper. "Ross?"

"Nina, where are you?"

"In here—*here!*"

He darted into the dining room, his skin abruptly chill and trembling under his sweat-damp shirt. Nina was crumpled on the floor, halfway between the telephone and the doorway. Her face was barely recognizable, contorted with pain. He made a quick step

toward her as she stifled an agonized cry from deep inside her.

"Nina!"

Her swollen body shuddered with a prolonged tremor of pain under her blue satin wrapper. "Call Dr. James——"

"Let me help you——"

"No!" Her hand fluttered vaguely. "Don't touch me . . . Doctor——"

He straightened quickly and seized the telephone.

"Information."

"Dr. James's office—or wherever he is. It's an emergency—hurry!"

While the receiver's diaphragm hummed and sang with a thousand interweaving line noises, he watched Nina with anxious eyes. Her closed lids made her bloodless face a death mask. Her mouth and cheeks and forehead were ashen, a dirty metallic gray under the swollen globules of sweat dissolving in trickling rivulets across her taut throat. Another spasm of pain thrust jagged spears through her. Her nerves' reaction fluttered across her skin. She groaned and pressed her teeth hard against her lower lip. He made to move toward her.

"Nina——"

"No . . . No, get doctor . . ."

"The operator's trying to reach him."

Her eyes opened briefly. "Tripped . . . couldn't get phone . . . tell him . . . hurry . . ."

A click in the receiver cut short the humming.

"Dr. James speaking."

"Doctor, this is Ross Nichols. Something's happened to Nina Blair. You've got to get out here right away."

"What?" The far-off voice sharpened with urgency. "Is she having regular pains?"

"I found her on the floor at home. She'd tripped and fallen."

"I'll be right out!" The voice was crisp, unhesitant. "And I'll have the hospital send the ambulance."

"Thank you, sir." Ross saw her face twitch again in an uncontrollable spasm of agony. "If there's anything I ought to do——"

As he spoke, Nina screamed. The sound ripped through him, like Korea all over again. It seemed to flicker across her face in a nervous flutter of facial muscles, registering visually the inhuman cry of protest against the tearing, pushing force inside her. The utter desolation in the sound stabbed into him with nauseating intensity.

"Ross!" she whimpered with fear. "Ross, it's coming! I can't stop it!"

Dr. James interrupted loudly over the wire. "What is it? What's wrong there?"

"Ross, help me, help me. . . . Oh, Julie, *Julie!*"

"The baby's coming."

"You're sure?"

"Yes! I'll have to help her——"

"Don't touch her!"

"But I——"

"She's on the floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then listen carefully. Get clean sheets and place them under her. Hurry. I'll stand by here and have the ambulance sent right out. Come back for further instructions as soon as you're done."

Ross placed the receiver on the table with exaggerated caution, impersonally noting his action as he did so. Nina moaned again on the floor, her eyes rolling weakly under her closed lids. He ran into her bedroom and wrenched open the bottom drawer of her maple bureau. The drawer fell on the floor, spilling hand towels and handkerchiefs. He let them stay where they had fallen and snatched up three folded sheets and ran back to the dining room.

Although sweat blanketed his back and shoulders in a clammy, leaking patch, his mind raced coolly and precisely, intent on the job to be done. Gently he lifted Nina up from the floor, steeling himself against her whimpering moan of protest. With his free hand he

placed two of the folded sheets under her as a delivery pad. Then he picked up the receiver to take further orders. But before he could speak, Nina screamed again. His insides lurched in primitive terror, moved by a sense of helplessness unknown to him even in Korea.

"Julie, Julie!" She was whimpering, losing control. "*Juliiieee!*"

"What is it?" Dr. James demanded hurriedly. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Julie, please, please, please, darling!"

Ross tried to repress a sudden trembling. "The head's coming."

"Don't touch her yet," the voice said calmly. "Coming fast?"

"I don't know." Suddenly, remembering Doreen, Ross had to fight off panic. "Where's that ambulance? Are you sure it's coming?"

"It's coming," the doctor said. "Now listen carefully. This is what I want you to do. It's up to you now. . . ."

While Nina moaned and whimpered on the floor, completely at the mercy of the life force fighting to escape from her, Ross listened intently to the telephoned instructions. Mumbling assurance of his essential understanding, he dropped the receiver on the table and knelt beside her in a single stooping movement. Doreen, his mind thought helplessly, Doreen. He swept the image away from him and began to talk to Nina in the way the doctor had told him. He repeated his instructions again and again. Her pain-dulled mind reacted slowly to the reiterated words.

"Julie . . . oh, Julie . . ."

At last Ross went to the table and picked up the receiver again.

"It's here, Doctor."

"Breathing?"

"I can't tell."

"Pick it up by its feet and slap its behind. Be careful not to stretch the cord. When it cries, put it down beside Nina. Don't touch the cord."

"Yes, sir."

When he turned, he seemed to be outside his body, as though he watched himself stoop and lift the child by its feet with excruciating

slowness. His left hand rose in the air with the frozen languor of an arm cutting a swath across the universe in a dream. His palm struck the spare, greasy buttocks with a remote, smacking sound. After an interminable period of time the child cried across vast space in barely audible protest. The sound seemed to penetrate Nina's torpor. She opened her eyes and smiled wearily up at him. Almost instantly her eyes closed again, but her smile reassured him. He laid the tiny body on the sheet beside her and returned to the telephone.

"It's breathing now, sir."

"Is Nina all right?"

"Apparently."

"Good. Cover each of them with a soft, warm blanket. Then watch them until help gets there."

From outside the fluctuating wail of a siren floated nearer the house. Ross watched the ambulance arrive outside the gate with curious detachment. Anjalance . . . amberlance. A white-coated intern jumped down, bag in hand, followed by the driver. They came briskly up the walk.

"Do you hear me?" the doctor was saying. "When help comes——"

"It's already here, sir."

"Fine. I'll be right out."

The intern was already inside the house before Ross replaced the receiver. The driver crowded after him.

"On the floor, gentlemen," Ross heard himself say with elaborate politeness. "If you don't mind, I'll let you take over now."

Both men stood aside as he walked to the door on an invisible chalk line, like a sleepwalker, single-purposed, strangely removed from reality. He heard the front door close behind him and smelled the pungent fragrance of the lindens. Then he knew all discipline was deserting him. He plunged blindly down the steps, fleeing the house in sudden unreasoning panic, fighting nausea, knowing his insides would retaliate directly and violently for the punishment he had inflicted upon them.

FROM the corner the convertible was a silvered shadow dappled by the darker linden shadows beyond the street light. Overhead the night sky had the brilliance of a California sky, reminiscent of nights along the beach at Carmel with Doreen. Most of the motel cabins were already dark.

"What do you mean by keeping a lady waiting?" Karen demanded as Ross came abreast of the convertible. "Don't you know I've been looking for you?"

His drinking had blurred his perceptiveness. Her voice seemed to come from a distance. It was like looking at a stranger, listening to a stranger, with nothing to say.

"What's the matter, Ross? Is anything wrong?" When he still failed to answer, Karen leaned across the seat and opened the car door. "Get in. I want to talk to you."

A certain inarticulate protest stirred inside him. It was too feeble to prevent him from stepping inside and closing the door.

"Shall we go out on the boat?" Her voice still seemed remote as she drove away. "It'll be cooler on the water."

"Yes . . ." He repressed an absurd impulse to shiver in the warm darkness. "All right."

He sat quietly beside her while she drove, isolated from her by his silence, unable to penetrate the invisible barrier. The drinking he had done to obliterate the images evoked by his experience with Nina had merely produced a state of semi-narcosis, semi-paralysis. He felt as though he were the victim of clumsily induced anesthesia. The images still remained, still graphic, unbearable. He still thought of Nina's brush with death and all the other deaths he had witnessed, caused, prevented. He still thought of Doreen.

"Dad says Nina's all right," Karen was saying. "He was a little worried about infection, since it wasn't exactly an ideal birth, but Nina's in no danger at the moment." Her voice still seemed distant, unrelated to either of them. "Julian got back from Cedar Falls, you know. I left them together in the hospital. He said he didn't stop to think if it was a boy or a girl until he was halfway home. Now that he knows it's a boy he's acting as though he's been given a bonus."

They stopped in the driveway beside her house. A single light burned in the entrance hall. She opened her door and then watched him fumble with the latch on his side. Her eyes had a new luminosity in the sheen of the starlight.

"Go down to the wharf," she said. "Dad's out on a case. I'll write a note for him so he won't worry."

Slowly, silently, Ross walked away from her, toward the pier. The *Spray* was tied up at the end of the dock. He listened to the water slap against the pier stakes, slow and measured, like the muffled beat of a requiem. A cool breeze blew gently from the water, as though trying to dispel the sodden heat. Then he heard Karen coming from the house. Her heels struck sharply and lightly against the pier boards in the dark. She stepped quickly aboard the run-about. He untied the rope and clambered after her.

Deftly, quietly, while the twin engines throbbed with impressive power, Karen maneuvered the *Spray* through the numerous craft anchored offshore. Their running lights glowed, red and green. The bow slipped through the water with the sibilance of tearing silk. The wake in their stern frothed in eerie phosphorescence in the starlight. She headed toward the blurred, sprawling mass of the island.

At last, less than a hundred yards east of the island, huge and shapeless in the glimmering dark, she killed the engines and payed out the anchor. The launch swung gently back and forth, as though on a pivot. The water shimmered under the glow of the running lights. She sat quietly beside him, her face grave and questioning in the green glow of the starboard light.

"I'm not actually drunk," he muttered. "I did my best, but I don't think it worked." He rubbed his knuckles against his brow. "In any case, I'm not at my scintillating best. . . ."

"You can't expect to be. You've just been through a real ordeal."

"Sudden births are something new to me. The babies I've seen haven't always been in one piece. . . ." His voice took on a smoldering bitterness. "I guess that's my trouble. I got to thinking about the mothers with dead babies. I've seen too many of them. . . ."

He listened to the water lap against the boat, passionlessly, weakly, like chastising hands lacking all anger. The surf had battered with vicious fury against his invasion craft. Now, toward shore, on the far side of the lake, an outboard motor spluttered excitedly, like the idiot chatter of a machine gun. He watched the thin white spume of the boat's passage ruffle a silvered vein in the water and thought of the patterns of tracer bullets.

"Well, now you know," he said. "It's idiotic, but I tried to get tight and get my nerves calmed down."

"Why idiotic? Why shouldn't it unnerve you?"

"Your father makes a living from it."

"Dad told me he was violently ill the first time he delivered a baby."

"You mean I'm following the classic Hippocratic tradition?"

"Don't think about it, Ross. You saved Nina's life. That's the important thing."

"I know all that. I know it should make me feel better. But it doesn't. I feel like hell. I keep remembering all the blood and screaming and spilled guts—and all because of the simple, everyday act of childbirth. . . ."

"Don't think about it. Don't." Suddenly, gently, while the launch swung to and fro in the shimmering water, she touched his hand. "What makes you keep so much inside you? Why won't you let anyone come near you?"

Her words brought about a sudden change between them. All at once, unable to answer her, he felt an absurd desire to hold off time

flash through him. He wondered if she knew about Pollard's visit to the house—and then realized she had been waiting outside the motel, not the bungalow. It meant she knew the truth about him, and yet, knowing the truth, she had never been so close to him before. He still wanted to postpone the immediate moment, to put off the inevitable.

"Darling . . ." she murmured.

When he kissed her, she yielded in his arms with an unexpected completeness. Her arms tightened about him. He pulled her close, kissing her with an intensity akin to desperation, as though he were drowning, seeking to lose himself in her.

"Darling . . . darling . . ."

Water slapped gently, insistently, beyond immediate consciousness. He drifted and swayed on a long, rolling wave. Then lazily he came back, conscious of the edge of the seat like a dull blade across his back. She lay at ease in his arms, the lightest of burdens, her breath sweetly warm against his face.

". . . if you're sorry," she murmured.

"Sorry?"

"I've been so obvious about it. I've pursued you night and day. I've made no attempt to hide it."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Now the shrewd young psychologist speaks," she said. "I threw myself at you. I've been completely shameless."

Silence gathered about them while he kissed her. The water sighed against the nearby beach. Night birds conversed in their clipped telegraphy in the dark tangled trees.

"You weren't shameless," he said. "I've just had other things on my mind."

"I know."

"Did Julian tell you?"

"No, my father. Chief Pollard told him." Her fingers traced the line of his mouth. "Dad said Pollard's pretty annoyed by your visit here. He feels you're trying to overthrow the local government."

"He also implied I might be implicated in Wad Brown's murder. In fact, he warned me not to leave town."

"Darling, that's ridiculous!"

"Because of Slop Slasher, you mean?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"Pollard also seemed to suspect Mac and you. He has a suspicious mind."

Her hand stopped abruptly. "Ross, that's crazy!"

"I'm only reporting what happened last night," he said. "Objectively, I hope."

"Well, I'm not sorry about Wad Brown. I think more than one person in town is glad to see him dead."

"Who?"

"Oh, nobody in particular. Just people in general. Maybe a husband or two, certain girls and women, people he bullied in one way or another. I'm just not interested in him."

"I'm interested in him. He killed my brother."

"Darling, if you came to Lake Teresa to get revenge——"

"Not revenge. Justice." He felt his jaw muscles tighten under her fingertips. "Brown's dead now, but that doesn't mean I still can't clear Chuck's name."

She seemed to draw away from him. Her fingers still rested lightly against his cheek, and yet she seemed to pull away from him. The movement was tenuous, intangible. He wondered if he had imagined it. Then her voice erased his doubts. She spoke calmly, without a trace of nervousness or resentment.

"What do you think you can do, Ross? Are you sure you know all the facts in the case?"

"I've read the *Gazette* stories, and I've talked to Eunice Barrow. I know others besides Chuck were in the immediate area of those murders last August. All of them knew the area intimately, and all of them knew the Fullers."

"I was one of them," Karen said quietly. "I don't know if Eunice Barrow mentioned it, but I was on that road that morning."

"I know you were." Ross hesitated. "What do you think actually happened that day? Do you agree with the Blairs that my brother and Alex Fuller were involved in a collision that started them arguing and ended up in a fight that killed young Fuller?"

Her head nodded assent in the half-light.

"Chuck wasn't the kind who started public brawls," Ross said. "I understand Alex Fuller was the same way. I'd like to know how either of them could've started that fracas."

"Why worry about that now, Ross? How can you ever hope to learn the truth about it?"

"Could Peggy Fuller have started that fight?"

Again she seemed to withdraw, somehow defensive, resentful. Then she appeared to bring herself under control.

"I'd rather not talk about it, Ross. I don't see what can be gained by talking about it."

"I get the impression Peggy was no innocent," he said. "On the other hand, Alex seems to have been a nice, ordinary kid, pretty naïve and trusting, the kind who never hurts anybody. I don't understand their marriage, and I can't see him getting involved in a fight with a stranger, particularly when the stranger was someone like Chuck."

Her voice rose sharply, unexpectedly. "I don't want to talk about it, Ross!"

"Why not?"

"I—I felt sorry for Alex. I still do."

"Were you in love with him?"

This time her withdrawal was unmistakable. His hand had covered her fingers. She jerked her hand away and then sat stiffly erect, apart from him.

"My timing's bad."

"It certainly is!"

"Karen, look. I'm older than you, but you're not a child. Surely I'm not the first man you've met. Personally— Well, I've been married before. In fact, this thing with Nina really upset me be-

cause of our own baby. He lived two days, and after that—well, now I'm divorced. It happened while I was in Korea. I suppose now's as good a time to tell you as any."

"It isn't," she said. "I don't want to hear about it."

"I don't mind hearing about Alex Fuller."

"There's nothing to tell you!" Her hands made quick adjustment of her disordered dress in the darkness. "I think we'd better be getting back."

"You don't seem to understand what I'm getting at. I only want to establish the truth about my brother."

"Suppose you already know the truth?" Her voice gained in strength. "Everybody here knows he's guilty. You can only cause a lot of harm if you insist on reviving the case. You can't bring your brother back to life, and you can't bring Alex and Peggy Fuller back. You'll only hurt Nina by opening up old wounds. It's best to accept what's happened. The past is dead. Let the future be without blemish, without suspicion."

He decided not to answer. They stirred apart in silence, separated from one another by the unexpected chasm of their differences. He pulled up the anchor as she started the engines thrumming and vibrating across the dark water. He looked away from her, watching the foaming wake while the *Spray* skimmed noisily toward the lights winking off in the darkness.

He was still silent when she drove him toward the Vista Motel. Her profile was set, delicate, invulnerable, like a chiseled mask. Their icy estrangement after their intimacy seemed impossible, and yet mutual obstinacy made tight-lipped strangers out of them. His determination to seek the truth was matched by her unwillingness to talk. She stopped at the curb. Without a word he stepped down to the pavement and closed the car door. Her hand moved at the wheel. He stood still while the convertible blended with the darkness, following the sweep of its headlights around the corner.

"Ross?"

The sound of his name brought him sharply about. A lighted

cigarette punctuated the night in a glowing red disk. The disk spun like a meteor from the inky shadow cast by the nearest darkened cabin. Julian Blair stepped toward him, identified momentarily by light glinting on his glasses before he moved into the darkness under the linden trees.

"Hello, Ross." His disembodied voice was thick and rasping, ill at ease. "I was wondering when you'd get here."

Cicadas and crickets fiddled in the nearby grass. A few last fireflies glimmered fitfully in the darkness. A mosquito hovered threateningly near, then veered away, noisily invisible.

"Ross . . ."

"Yes?"

"I don't know how to thank you."

"Forget it. I'm still kicking myself for not getting to her sooner."

"Nina said if you hadn't come——" Julian's voice faltered and broke. "God, what she must have gone through! When I think how I left her all alone——"

"Don't start blaming yourself for something you couldn't help. She's going to be all right. She's out of danger now."

"But if you hadn't been there——"

"Well, I was. . . ." Despite himself, Ross felt abruptly irritable. Why had Karen refused to talk? What had happened to them? Julian's fumbling concern annoyed rather than touched him. "Sorry, Julian, but I'm kind of fagged out. I think I'll turn in."

His irritation remained with him overnight.

Waking late, resisting the act of waking, he perversely resented the cheerfulness of the sunlight and the fragrant breeze fluttering the white curtains away from his open window. He tried to force

his mind to fix accusingly on Julian, but under his simmering irritability lurked an emotion unrelated to Julian. Behind his eyes he carried the image of Karen, repeated again and again, her profile lovely and remote against the starlight while her silence slashed a gulf between them.

What had happened to them? What lay behind her reluctance to talk about Alex Fuller?

Nina had told him she suspected Karen had been in love with young Fuller. But that hardly explained her reaction to his questioning. Or had he been irremediably tactless? The cold light of morning-after logic exposed his indiscretion. While she still lay in his embrace, he had asked her if she had loved another man and then had proceeded to tell her about his former wife. He had been tactless to the point of boorishness. But did that explain the depth and extent of her withdrawal? He doubted it. Something else lay behind it, though she had freely admitted she was one of the possible suspects his questioning of Eunice Barrow had uncovered. He found himself reluctant to pursue the thought.

At lunch time he met Mac for coffee in the malt shop.

"Jack-of-all-trades Nichols, hey?" MacFarland rubbed his splayed nose with the back of his hand. "You ought to start advertising, pal. Directing, soldiering, and midwifing done cheap."

"How'd you find out?"

"I ran into the proud father on my way here. He claims you can do Caesareans with one hand tied behind your back."

"Go to hell."

Mac adjusted his eye patch, touching its lower edge in what had become an automatic gesture with him. "What's eating you, Nichols?"

"Nothing's eating me." Ross pushed his emptied cup away from him. "I don't know if there's any point in staying on here. I feel like getting out of town."

"When did you decide that? Don't you offer your patients special postnatal care?"

"Forget it," Ross said. "I don't need any comedy."

When they became silent, he regretted his abruptness. It was a repetition of his rupture with Karen. There was an unaccustomed feeling of strain between them. But it was too late to make amends. He lacked the nervous energy to go through the necessary motions. He wanted to be left alone until he could replenish his spent forces.

Within the hour he returned to the motel after walking aimlessly under shade trees whose rustling foliage offered scant protection against the blazing sun. His shirt was clinging to his perspiring back. He was headed for his cabin and a cold shower when the manager called to him from the office.

"Telephone, Mr. Nichols!"

The public booth outside the office was stifling.

"I've been trying to get you," said Julian's voice on the wire. "Can you go to the hospital with me tonight, Ross?"

"Are you sure Nina would like me to come?"

"Are you kidding? Do you realize you're her only topic of conversation now?"

Ross stood silent. The thought of Karen lay in him like a cloud. Disturbing countercurrents of puzzlement and resentment and guilt still stirred inside him. He had to focus his pique against someone. Julian was the logical scapegoat.

"I don't think I ought to, Julian."

"For Pete's sake, Ross—if you're sore about the way I——"

"I don't like hospitals."

"Who does?" Julian demanded. "Say you'll come, Ross. If you don't show up, Nina's going to be pretty disappointed."

"We-ell . . ." The pleading reproach in the voice over the wire humbled him. He felt shamed by the unguarded love he remembered in the naïve, earnest eyes. "All right, Julian. I'll be there."

Afterward, taking his cold shower, he tried to decide why he had told Mac he was ready to leave town. The remark had been as much a surprise to him as it had been to Mac. What had prompted it? Was he ready to believe his own brother's guilt because of

Karen? He shook his head and grabbed a towel and began to rub his hair with unwarranted vigor.

He had dinner alone in Sam's Inn. The restaurant was crowded with tourists. The fattish, balding proprietor failed to recognize him.

Later he walked to the hospital on Locust Avenue, two blocks away from the public library. Inevitably he halted at the foot of the steps, reluctant to pass under the limestone overhang. The thought of the universal hospital smell of anesthetic and antiseptic commingled with the impalpable odor of death dismayed him. It revived both Doreen's time with the baby and the nightmarish detail of the base hospital. While the waiting casualties moaned and retched, with a few screaming in the interminable period before the morphine took effect, he had watched the surgeons working swiftly under the lights and thought of Doreen and her confinement back home. Both were memories one was advised to forget, like unsuccessful marriages. He flung his cigarette into the gutter and went quickly up the steps.

Inside, as the double screen doors closed behind him, he came to a sudden halt on the rubber-tiled floor.

Karen James stood waiting at the elevators beyond the information desk.

The hospital smell assaulted his nostrils, but it barely evoked the unwanted past. Karen stood motionless, tall and slender in a yellow print frock. He went slowly toward her, wanting to embrace her, remembering the touch of her lips and hands, the movement of her body in the act of love.

"I didn't know you'd be here," he said stiffly.

"Julian called me this afternoon. He didn't say you were coming, either."

Again restraint was between them like a dividing wall. He recalled every moment of their love-making with deep tenderness, but he could say nothing to her. She seemed withdrawn again, reserved, aloof, unapproachable.

The elevator gate grated open. He followed her inside the

cramped little cubicle. Their silence was underlined by the humming ascent.

On the maternity floor, in a double room at the end of the corridor, they found Nina lying in bed, looking no more than seventeen, her face diminutive and pale-eyed under a gay blue ribbon in her hair. Julian and his father sat on either side of her. The second bed was empty. The two men rose as Karen stepped into the room. She went directly to the bed and bent down to kiss Nina on the cheek and then stepped aside. Nina held out her hand to Ross, smiling up at him. Her eyes seemed to come alive with happiness.

"Howdy, doc."

"Hello, Nina."

Julian and his father shook hands with Ross as a nurse came in for the new flowers Julian had brought for Nina. Loneliness had left its mark on Andrew Blair's lean, tired-eyed face. He was one of those widowers, Julian had said, who are victims of monogamy. The three men and Karen grouped themselves around the bed, chatting about the weather, the new baby.

"The kids called me at the office just before I left," said Julian. "They wanted to know all about their new brother."

"I don't know why they should," Nina retorted. "I talked to them for half an hour right after lunch. I thought they'd never get off the line."

Julian clapped his hand to his brow in a classic gesture of dismay and despair. "Judas! One more child and I'll be a financial as well as a mental bankrupt. . . ."

The nurse returned with the flowers. They waited while she arranged the vases on the white metal bureau opposite the window. At last she left them with a rustle of starched linen.

Nina glanced at Ross. "Why so quiet, Nichols? Hasn't Julie told you what to say about my son?"

"He hasn't even told me its name." Ross waited patiently while husband and wife alike broke into hushed, conspiratorial laughter. "Well, doesn't it have a name?"

"If you please, Nichols!" Nina said primly. "Don't call it an it. It's a he, and he's going to be named for his godfather. Ross Nichols Blair—how do you think it sounds?" She giggled impishly when Ross reddened with embarrassment. "Don't you like it?"

"You know I do."

"Then that settles that," she said. "Now we can get on with the party."

"Party?"

"Our thank-the-good-Lord-you-saved-this-little-party party. Dr. James tells me I mightn't be here if it hadn't been for you."

Andrew Blair spoke up. "Yes indeed. Nina's lucky you came home, young man, and she's even luckier you didn't lose your head."

Ross sat still, embarrassed again, conscious of Karen's silence, her face quiet and unfathomable across the bed.

"It's true," said Nina. "You saved my life, you lug." She looked pertly around at the others. "Well, who's going to make the presentation speech?"

"You, naturally," said Julian.

"I think Daddy Blair."

"Don't look at me. Julian's the man for this job."

"Karen, honey, who's your candidate?"

"I refuse to commit myself. I don't even know what it's all about."

"Well, by acclamation, Julie——"

Julian shook his head. "I still agree with myself. You tell him, Mrs. Blair."

"Looks like I'll have to." Nina reached under her pillow and brought out a rolled scroll of paper. "Mr. Nichols, we hereby announce we'd like to see you stick around for a long, long time. To that end, therefore, we're sinking roots for you. On behalf of Ross Nichols Blair and all the other Blairs, young and old, we hereby present you with this deed to a lakeside lot in the unrestricted part of Lake Teresa. Daddy Blair can explain the full details to you later."

Ross took the deed from her, turning its rolled length in his hands, not quite knowing what to do with it.

"Unroll it and look at it," Nina scolded. "Don't you want to see your name on a legal document?"

"Oh, I believe it," he said. "I just don't know what to say. It's like being a kid at Christmas with that first electric train. I don't remember ever getting a train before."

Across the bed Karen sat still and quiet, somehow apart from them.

"But that's not all," Julian was saying. "Now for the real surprise."

"Surprise!" Nina glared at him in mock indignation. "Julian Blair, do you mean to tell me you've planned something else and didn't tell me about it?"

"I didn't have a chance to, honey. Dad and I just talked it over this afternoon." Julian took a deep breath and then nervously adjusted his glasses. "With your permission, baby, we'd like to do something about Alex's case. . . ."

"Julie, I don't know what you—" Then Nina slowly nodded. "Oh. Well, if you really think—"

"We do, honey. Now that we know what Ross's brother was like we think Ross has a right to question the official version of what happened."

Again Nina nodded. Her hands gripped the rolled hem of the sheets drawn over her. Across the bed Karen still sat motionless and silent.

Andrew Blair spoke up again. "You can blame me for the decision, Nina. Last year, as you know, I tried to play down the story as much as possible for your sake, but now I'm ready to give it full publicity. If a wrong's been committed, then it's our duty to see it righted. If not—well, that's the chance all of us have to take. In any case, we're going to demand that Pollard and the county attorney's office reopen the case for new investigation."

For a long moment Ross sat unmoving. Then elation and hu-

military swept over him in a long, slow wave. He felt his face light up with a million candles. There was no need for words. His face was eloquent with sheer incandescent brightness.

"I realize what your brother's case means to you," Andrew Blair continued. "I also know what Nina and her children mean to Julian and myself. It's the only commensurate way I know of expressing our gratitude to you. It's very little, but there it is."

"It's a great deal, sir."

The party mood had vanished. They were quiet, reflective, almost solemn. Even Nina was subdued. Ross rolled the scroll between his hands, then let it uncoil in his fingers. It occurred to him that Karen was still unusually silent. She had responded neither to the presentation of the deed nor to Chuck's case.

"Does Pollard know your decision yet, sir?"

"Not until tomorrow."

"How do you think he'll take it?"

"We'll handle that when the time comes," said Andrew Blair. "We've taken on fights before. I don't think we're likely to back away from one if it comes up now."

Ross was tempted to ask the nature of their past battles, but it seemed unwise to crowd his luck. Later on he could take up the questions of the Negro on the station platform, Max Gershowitz, the *Restricted* signs on Selby properties. He pushed his chair back from the bed.

Nina made a face. "You're not leaving already?"

"I think so. I'd like to get my bearings after all this." When they looked at him, he felt impelled to explain. "Something's happened to me tonight. . . ." He avoided looking at Karen. "For some time now I've thought I'd be trapped if I ever settled down. Somehow that's all been changed in the last half hour. . . ."

Turning away from the bed, not looking at Karen, he moved briskly into the corridor and then walked quickly toward the elevators. The rolled deed in his hand felt like a baton, a dagger. Unconsciously he made a stabbing motion with it. Why had Karen

been so unenthusiastic, so unresponsive? The hospital smell gathered about him, oppressive, depressing. He stepped into the open elevator, eager to get away from the oversweet fragrance of the flowers the nurses already were placing outside the rooms, gathering like the cloying odor of anesthetic in his nostrils.

16

LYING awake in her bed, watching the light seep across the floor from under the lowered shade at the east window, Karen heard the alarm clock in her father's room ring in a series of Lilliputian, discordant explosions. The sound was abruptly cut off. Then a floor board creaked in the hall as he went into the bathroom to shave and dress. On her return from school she had planned to make breakfast for him each morning before he left for surgery at the hospital. He had scorned the suggestion. Now she was thankful for his refusal, unable to face him, unwilling to see anyone.

In a little while she heard the front door open and close downstairs. There was a pause filled by the morning clamor of the birds. Then she heard the car come along the driveway, backing into the street.

She still lay in bed after her father had gone. Was Ross awake or still sleeping? She thought of him with deep longing, wanting to be with him, linking their images with a sensuality whose range astonished her. Then reality intervened. Why indulge in self-delusion? After her behavior at the hospital the gap between them was wider than ever. Her silent withdrawal from the impromptu celebration had widened it for them. She loved him, she had no doubts about her love for him, but the unwanted past drove a wedge between them. She wished desperately for Alex's case to remain closed, officially solved, with no excuse for anyone to demand the truth.

The truth had to remain buried, even in her own mind. Charles Vinson was Ross's brother, but she would always think of him as a stranger, nameless, faceless, someone lying dead with Wad Brown's bullets in his back. It was Alex who had mattered. Alex still mattered, though the emotion he had stirred in her was blunted now, overshadowed and replaced by her unashamed desire for Ross. Alex was dead, but his name still had to be protected because of Nina, because of Peggy. By now the truth could neither raise the dead nor comfort the living. It could only hurt both the living and the dead.

Once again she realized the truth had many facets. Whenever she thought of Alex, she could see herself standing over Peggy Fuller's still-warm body, horrified and yet fiercely glad her enemy was dead. Memory seemed to freeze her image in time for that instant, ringing her about with guilt and recrimination, isolating the truth as a symbol of deception and cowardice. She shut her eyes against the thought. The truth was other things, other hurts, other evasions. She wanted, like a child, to have undone what was done, to endow Ross with a safe new background, to be free of all guilt and anxiety.

But if Ross persisted in his search for the truth . . .

If Julian and his father carried out the promise they had made in the hospital . . .

At last she dressed and went downstairs and brewed herself coffee and then sat at the table in the breakfast nook, forgetting the percolator on the stove and the empty cup in front of her, looking out at the *Spray* at the end of the pier, remembering the gentle pitch of its deck while they were together.

Later in the morning she drove downtown to shop for the week end. Main Street had a festive air. The annual red, white, and blue streamers were garlanded between the light standards in anticipation of Independence Day. The Saturday-morning shoppers milled amiably on the pavements under the paper canopies. She came out of the supermarket near the post office, her arms loaded with bulging paper sacks, making her way back to the convertible against the

sluggish current of window shoppers and couples on their way to the beach.

At the car she fumbled for the door handle from under the two bags of groceries in her arms.

"Allow me, Miss James."

Langdon Garth stepped forward from a nearby parking meter. She noticed the big man's British runabout several cars away as he took the parcels from her and deposited them on the front seat.

"Thank you." She smiled, rubbing her arms. "They weighed heavier than I thought they'd be."

"Like our sins," Garth murmured. "If sins are still fashionable nowadays . . ." His big, tailored body seemed to loom over her. "Speaking of sins, how is our local *Hamlet* doing? I've been meaning to come back for a second look at it."

"We're still sold out every night."

"Well, that's good news. You must congratulate young Nichols for me."

Karen slid behind the steering wheel, using the movement to avoid making a direct comment. Garth's casual manner had an ironic, probing quality. She inserted the starter key in the ignition lock.

"Nichols is quite talented, you know. The playhouse was quite fortunate in getting his services for this production. I shudder to think what his predecessor would've done with it."

"I'm inclined to agree. . . ." The engine muttered impatiently under the prodding of her foot. "Well, I really must go, Mr. Garth. I have to get back to the house."

When she returned home, she stocked the refrigerator and the pantry with her purchases and then went outside to the garden. It flaunted all the earmarks of neglect. Dandelions covered the lawn like strewn coins; thistles flourished among the petunias and nasturtiums. She knelt on the grass, thrusting the trowel through the cracked brown crust of the unwatered flower bed, intent on using

the physical exertion to dispel all thoughts of Ross, thinking of Langdon Garth and Peggy Fuller.

She was pruning the Dorothy Hadleys against the south wall when the telephone rang. Its bell pealed with urgent loudness inside the house, evoking the countless times it had awakened her at night, with her father muttering curt queries and instructions before hurrying outside to the car on still another emergency call. It rang again, peremptorily, almost irritably. She put down her pruning shears and hurried inside.

"Karen?" For a moment, lifting the receiver, she was afraid it was her anonymous caller, but the querulous voice immediately identified the speaker. "Martha Selby, dear. I've just got back to town. I want to hold a directors' meeting this afternoon."

"This afternoon, Mrs. Selby? What's it about?"

"I'd rather not go into that over the phone, Karen. If you can come to my place at two-thirty—"

"All right," said Karen. "I'll be there."

Nina had predicted trouble would follow the Selbys' discovery of Ross's connection with Alex's case. Evidently Chief Pollard had already seen the Selbys about him. The inevitable repercussions were already making themselves felt.

At two-thirty Martha Selby opened the door as Karen crossed the white-columned portico. She was as badly and as expensively dressed as ever. The lines of her green linen frock accentuated the shapelessness of her figure; its color clashed loudly with her sallow skin. Her full brown eyes seemed dilated with their disturbing stare, bright with an abnormal brilliance.

"You're a little late, my dear, but that doesn't matter. I've had an opportunity to talk things over with Lloyd Mowrer while we've been waiting." She smiled mincingly as Karen accompanied her through the drawing room and out to the terrace overlooking the lake. "Lloyd arrived a few minutes early for a change."

Lloyd Mowrer rose from his chair with expansive pomposity, like

a rumpled hired hand playing the role of mine host. His blue suit was wrinkled and in need of dry cleaning. He smiled with his customary unctuousness, his white square teeth so palpably false in his florid moonface.

"Please don't get up," said Karen. "I'm sorry I'm late. I thought we were to start at two-thirty."

"No, no," Lloyd said. "Two. I've been here since two."

Karen forbore correcting him, aware of Martha Selby watching her. "Where's Dudley? Is he late too?"

"Dudley's in St. Louis with his mother. He won't be back until next week. But we can carry on without him," Lloyd said, sitting. "Even though he isn't here, we still have a quorum, you know."

Nodding her agreement, Karen silently paid tribute to Martha Selby as a strategist. Lloyd had plainly been invited a half hour early. Now he was fully prepared to support his hostess in any assault she might launch. With Nina in the hospital and Dudley Fortune out of town, the opposition was confident she was outnumbered two to one.

"Well, now we're here we might as well open our discussion," Martha Selby said abruptly, moving behind her chair and leaning her bony forearms on its tall chintz-covered back. "I think I ought to preface what I have to say with a few remarks about the town we live in, especially about the attitude of its citizens toward our organization. I mean to say, in other words, we have a definite responsibility toward the community. In short, we can't afford to do anything which puts the playhouse in a bad light."

"Has anything happened which does that, Mrs. Selby?"

"I think you're well aware of that, Karen. As I said when I called you, I've only just come back to town. I'm sure you knew about it before I did. I'm referring, of course, to Ross Nichols. I'll frankly admit I was shocked when I found out. I consider his action most reprehensible. It's inexcusable under any circumstances, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at anything a murderer's family might do."

"Ross Nichols isn't any murderer, Mrs. Selby. He's done nothing to bring the playhouse into disrepute. The fact is—and I think we'll all agree on this—he's given us the best production we've ever had. For my part, I've been eager to sign him up for the rest of the season."

"Well, really!" Martha Selby looked at Lloyd Mowrer. "What's your opinion on that, Lloyd?"

Questioned, Lloyd Mowrer coughed and covered his mouth with his hand. "Excuse me, ladies." He patted his face with a tartan handkerchief. "Personally, Karen, I believe Martha's right. It's an unfortunate relationship. People are likely to complain, and rightly so."

"About what?"

"About the playhouse employing someone related to the killer who took my poor child's life," Martha Selby said bitterly. "As you know, I never talk about my tragedy. It's much too painful for me to bear discussion. I bring it up now only because the reputation of the playhouse is at stake. You persuaded us to hire Ross Nichols, my dear, if that's his real name, but I'm sure even you wouldn't have done so if you'd known the truth about him."

Karen repressed quick anger. "What do you propose to do, Mrs. Selby?"

"As a member of this board, I refuse to countenance this young man's employment as our director. My conscience won't permit me to betray either my daughter's memory or my fellow citizens. I hereby call upon the council to vote on the motion that we seek another director without delay."

Karen turned. "Well, Lloyd?"

His glance wavered. "Well, I—I second Martha's motion. . . ." He coughed again. "In essence, I vote in favor of Nichols' removal."

"I vote against it," said Karen.

Martha Selby smiled in jaundiced triumph. "In that event, in order to break the tie——"

"But there isn't any tie, Mrs. Selby."

The smile froze, like a painted travesty of a smile. The prominent eyes under the stubborn, lank hair narrowed with suspicion.

"Perhaps I should say there isn't any tie yet," Karen said quietly. "You see, I visited Nina Blair at the hospital last night. Nina gave me her proxy vote in the event of something like this." Taking out the sealed envelope she had been fingering in her pocket, she placed it on the glass-topped table beside her chair. "Here is Nina's signed authorization giving me the right to cast her vote as I wish. I vote as before."

"No!" The older woman struck the back of her chair with her open hand. "You're out of order!"

"You might ask Lloyd about that. After all, he's an attorney." The beefy face nodded in reluctant agreement.

"Then I suggest we postpone our decision until our next council meeting," Karen said quietly. "Nina'll be home from the hospital, and I'm sure Dudley will be back from St. Louis. Does that meet with everyone's approval?"

She waited for an answer. Both remained silent. She rose briskly, then put out her hand in quick rejection as Lloyd Mowrer moved toward her.

"No, thanks, Lloyd. I can find the door without any trouble. Good-by, Mrs. Selby."

Absurdly enough, walking away from them proved to be an ordeal. But she traversed the enormous distances between the terrace and the entrance hall without mishap. Her hand fumbled for the latch. She realized with faint disgust that she was trembling.

Outside, she drove faster than need be, venting her spite on the car, letting her anger expend itself in a burst of power under her foot. Paradoxically her anger was directed less at Martha Selby than at herself. Why had she bothered to defend Ross? What reason had she to believe the gap between them could be closed? It was better for him to leave than to continue his inquiry. She had acted emotionally, as though she were under Nina's influence.

She was still angry when she stopped at Curley's Drug Store on

Main Street. Everyone in town seemed to have the same idea about the heat. The soda fountain and the neighboring booths were crowded. She walked toward the end of the store, through a glittering fabric of sound woven by the pleasant, buzzing murmur of voices, the clatter of dishes and cutlery, the random *cling!* of the cash register. Then she halted in mid-step, stopped by the reflections in the mirror opposite the rear booth. Ross and Mac were there. Ross sat with his back toward her. She felt her blood slow and then accelerate with the renewed beat of her heart. Mac caught sight of her in the mirror and turned and waved, his black silk patch accenting the engaging toughness of his face. She went on, making herself smile back at Mac, seemingly at ease and self-possessed, like the smiling faces she passed on her way to the last booth.

Ross stood up. "Hello."

Across from him Mac grinned and patted the table top. "Sit down and join the fun. It's non-alcoholic."

"Oh?" She sat beside Mac, not wanting to be too close to Ross. Then she half regretted it, finding herself facing him, unable to avoid his gaze. "Maybe I need something stronger than a Coke at that."

Mac tilted an inquiring brow. "Trouble?"

It was unpremeditated, even contrary to her intentions, but she found herself recounting her meeting with Martha Selby and Lloyd Mowrer. She paused briefly to order a Coke and then went on in full detail. They listened in silence, letting her finish without interruption.

"Sounds like the bloodhounds are loose," Mac commented, running his hand through his tufted hair. "Still want to hang around, Nichols?"

"I don't know," Ross said soberly. "I don't know what to think at this point."

When they left, the buxom blonde at the cash register reserved her warmest smile for Mac. Waiting at the door with Ross, momentarily silent, Karen watched the cashier giggle appreciatively at

Mac's parting sally. He joined them, grinning. They pushed open the revolving door, passing from the drugstore's air-conditioned coolness into the breathless heat of the summer afternoon. Then she saw his face abruptly change expression. The smile was still present, but he had become alert, wary, looking past her down the sidewalk.

"Looks like we've got company," he muttered. "Better get going, you two."

Then she saw what was wrong. Arch Gilman was approaching them on the deserted sidewalk, free for the moment of dawdling shoppers. He was drunk. He came unsteadily toward them, moving on a wavering line which led unmistakably to Mac. He had an ugly look about him, his clothes in vague disorder, his hair unkempt above his truculent porcine eyes.

"Hi, bastard."

Mac said nothing, waiting with deceptive carelessness, his arms loose at his sides, fists lightly clenched.

"You deaf, you sonofabitch?" Gilman looked unclean. His grubby face was dominated by his oily, fleshy nose. The whites of his eyes seemed grained with dirt. "God damn it——"

"Move along, pal," Mac advised quietly. "This is my day off. I'll talk to you during working hours."

Gilman swore with succinct, pointed obscenity.

"I said to move along," Mac said. "I don't like your brand of conversation."

The pulpy man spat on the sidewalk, deliberately missing Mac's feet by a scant two inches. "Think I don't know what's goin' on, huh? Well, quit botherin' my wife, you bastard. Leave LaVerne alone, by God, or I'll kill you, you lousy——"

Stepping forward, Mac seized Gilman's left coat sleeve with his left hand, then clapped his cupped right palm against the bristled, sagging jaw. The blow made a sharp, dry report. Gilman staggered slightly and shook his sleeve free, then hunched his shoulders in a clumsy fighting crouch. He moved flat-footedly in a half circle,

seeking an opening in Mac's casual defense. He swung wildly and missed. Mac calmly waited.

"Get going, you two," he said. "Get her out of here, Nichols. I don't want any trouble."

Two minutes before the sidewalk had been deserted. Now they were the center of a tight little circle of onlookers. A concerted murmur of approval sighed through the group as Mac jabbed at Gilman's ribs, making him wheeze with pain.

"Get out of here," Mac muttered again. "This thing's going to be a brawl. Get her out of it, pal."

Karen opened her mouth to protest, but Ross gripped her arm. She was forced to follow him as he shouldered his way through the growing cluster of elated spectators. He still held her arm, half pulling and half pushing her until they were outside the circle and moving quickly toward the convertible. He released her arm and opened the door, ushering her inside before she could demur.

"But we can't leave him!"

"He told us to." Ross stood at the curb, looking back at the shoving, squirming bodies hiding Mac and Gilman from view. "MacFarland can take care of himself. He didn't want you mixed up in it."

"What did Arch Gilman mean about Mac bothering his wife?"

"I wouldn't know." He looked past her again. "There's nothing you can do. You might as well go home."

There was no arguing with him. They were like two polite strangers talking to one another against their will in a foreign railway carriage, impersonally discussing a wayside accident no longer within view. She wanted to lean toward him and touch him—or hit him—anything to bridge the chasm dividing them. It remained an inchoate, uncrystallized impulse.

"I suppose you're right," she said coldly. "After all, woman's place is in the home."

THE local lockup was a low, square structure adjoining the county courthouse. Its red brick front and wide concrete steps and the soft purple neon lights ornamenting its double-doored entrance made it a handsome example of municipal architecture. From the back it presented a less pleasing picture—a rain-streaked concrete wall scrawled with rude caricatures and the immemorial obscenities of youth, gashed with the barred apertures of its five cells. By day the slotted openings were black against the gray wall. After sundown they became latticed patches of gray light, illuminated by the single globe burning in each cell, high on the narrow ceiling, behind a protective wire screen.

The light in the middle cell shone down pallidly on Mac. His face was in shadow, patterned in geometric black and white by the bars of his cell door. Smoke curled slowly from the cigarette in his mouth.

"My God, MacFarland," Ross said bitterly. "What made you send me away? Why didn't you let me hang around and help out?"

"It's a good thing you didn't, pal. No sense in you getting jumped by Pollard's goons too." When Mac moved from the shadows, his face came into arresting focus. He had taken a beating. His mouth was puffed and badly cut in one corner. His cheeks were stained with purplish bruises. Above the black patch a raised welt of livid flesh slanted up from his left brow at a raffish angle. "The Keystone cossacks really worked me over."

"Which makes you guilty of disturbing the peace."

"You expect the charge to be barratry or moper?"

Ross watched the wry, battered face, feeling anger slowly rising inside him. "What made you hit him in the first place?"

"A matter of principle, I guess. I don't like beer drinkers." Mac blew smoke, eying his cigarette with a contemplative glance. "After

the first one I thought I'd get in my licks for Gershowitz. What I didn't bargain on was having the law pour it on me. I didn't think my eye would give me so much trouble, either. My sense of perspective was all cockeyed. Half my punches never even landed. This damn patch'll get me in a hell of a mess one of these days."

The sound of the Saturday-night traffic on Main Street reached them in sighing, recurrent waves borne on the night wind. Within the jail the only sound was that of water dripping unseen, slowly, steadily, like a physical symbol of the imperishable and universal prison smell—of blood, of urine, of vomit—a faint, rank odor of human sweat and human misery, the cumulative legacy bequeathed it by the drunks and vagrants its cells had housed.

"Didn't Gilman's role as an outraged husband strike you as a little odd?"

Mac brought his head up. "How so?"

"Well, he knows his wife's no paragon of virtue. He gave her that black eye over Brown. Yet he starts a fight with you on Main Street."

"Yeah . . ." The thick brows bunched together, frowning. "Polard tried to get me to talk about LaVerne and Wad Brown."

"In what way?"

"He said her initials were in some kind of notebook in Brown's wallet. He was trying to catch me up on dates when she might've been with Brown. Last week end, for instance. I didn't bite." Mac scowled. "I dunno about Gilman. He got himself tanked up, that's all. He wasn't faking that drunk act. I could've chinned myself on that breath of his."

"Did you think he suspected there was anything between you and his wife?"

"Who knows? Maybe somebody tipped him off, but tell me who. His staff hates his guts. They'd never stool on me, assuming they know about it. Slop Slasher? Maybe. But Slop's been gone all week. I don't know why Gilman would wait until today if he's known about us for a week or more."

"Maybe there's another explanation," Ross said. "Pollard's threatened to act tough with both of us. Maybe he decided to make you a scapegoat. I lose out at the playhouse, and you get tossed into jail. He could figure it's a good way to persuade us to leave town."

"Could be, pal. Sounds reasonable." Mac dropped his glowing cigarette butt on the concrete floor and ground it out with his heel. "If you ask me, the whole damn thing's a lousy mess. From what we've found out, it all goes back to Peggy Fuller. All because of that freckle-faced little tramp—"

He broke off. A metal door had clanged at the end of the corridor. Ross turned. A beefy officer in rolled-up shirt sleeves came along the corridor. Keys jangled on the metal key ring in his hand.

"Okay, bud. Haul it out of here."

Ross looked at his sweating face. "Me?"

"Both of you." The turnkey unlocked the cell door. "You're out on bail, stupid."

"Who put it up?"

"Doc James. On your way."

Mac moved into the corridor. "How about this, pal?"

"I didn't want to say anything until I knew it was taken care of. Karen did it. I didn't know it would come through this fast."

The turnkey closed the cell door and then led the way past the two remaining empty cells to the door at the end of the corridor. At the sergeant's desk Mac was given his personal belongings. While he signed a receipt for them, Ross looked around the big, bare room. The door to Pollard's office was closed. Mac stuffed his things into his pockets. They went outside.

The convertible was parked at the curb. Its waxed surface gleamed under the nearby street light. Karen waited for them behind the wheel. Overhead, like a displaced halo, moths hovered in a spinning gray cloud under the street lamp.

"The gladiator home from the wars," Karen murmured. "Where would you like to go, Mr. MacFarland?"

"I think I'll pick up my duffel at the hotel first. After saying thanks, you understand. Then I'll find a place to bunk for the night."

"It's a pleasure, Mr. MacFarland. Get in."

The convertible moved away from the street light.

"Such a lovely night," Karen murmured. "We're having perfect weather. It was like this last August."

Mac glanced up at the starred sky. "Yeah. Same way in Cincinnati. I remember the day Chuck was killed—hot as blazes down there, like San Diego in July—"

"You can take my place at the motel," Ross said, not wanting to talk about it. "I wasn't planning to move back with Julian until tomorrow, but he won't object if I stay there tonight."

"Okay, pal. Sounds okay."

At the Lakeside Hotel, Ross and Karen waited outside in the convertible while Mac went inside for his duffel bag. Neither spoke. They sat apart from one another while dance music from an unseen radio thumped and shrilled in the darkness. On the lake the stertorous rasp of an outboard motor scraped across the warm summer night.

At last Mac rejoined them. He slung his duffel bag behind the seat. He seemed oddly subdued, like Nina in the hospital. They drove off in silence.

"I think I'll turn in," Mac said at the motel. "I can use a shower and a little solitude. See you tomorrow, Nichols. Thanks again, Karen."

Karen smiled. "Any time, D. J." She looked at Ross. "I'll take you to Julian's."

Ross was about to refuse, repelled by the impersonal politeness between them. Then his mind reverted to Mac standing behind the cell door, his face cut and battered. It changed their relationship. He sat quietly beside her as she swung the convertible around a parked car and eased deftly into the Saturday-night traffic.

"It's really been quite a week," she said at the end of the block,

still polite, still removed from him. "First Wad Brown's murder, then Nina having her baby, now the council meeting this afternoon and Mac being beaten up——"

"And us."

Karen kept her eyes on the road.

"I've been wanting to talk about us," Ross said.

"You don't need to say anything."

"I want to."

"I couldn't find words, either. . . ." Her profile was delicately resolute in silhouette against the illumined roadside floating past them in the gliding sweep of their lights. "After I used too many words, I mean . . ."

"Don't talk that way."

"Why not? Isn't it true?"

They were on the lake road, gathering speed in the darkness.

"Wait a minute," Ross said. "We can't talk like this. Park along here somewhere. We've got to talk this out."

At last she slowed down. He turned the ignition key before they stopped and then sat back, looking at her. The wan light from the instrument panel shone upward, investing her face with a false pallor.

"I can thank Mac for this," he said slowly, seeking the right words, the right beginning. "It made me sick inside when I saw how they'd hurt him. Immediately I knew that just two people in this world mean anything to me." When she stirred, as though about to reply, he quickly put a restraining hand on her bare forearm. "Let me finish. I came here because of my mother and my brother, but you and Mac really represent everything inside the orbit my world swings around on. We know next to nothing about one another, but I know I love you. If it means complications for both of us—well, that's a risk we'll have to take."

When she failed to answer, he thought she was crying. Then he knew she was laughing, silently, inwardly, her teeth white against her lower lip.

"You fool," she whispered, her smiling grimace the obverse side of tears. "You fool!"

"What?"

A gray-winged night moth blundered against the windshield with a soft thud.

"And all the time I thought—" She shook her head, biting her lip, trying not to cry. "Ross, you do love me? You do trust me?"

"Why shouldn't I trust you?"

"I—I don't know—" Her face had a shimmering fragility in the glow of the dashboard. "Let's not say any more!" She was in his arms, her finger to his mouth, stopping anything he might say. "We won't think about it. There's no need to. There are more important things we could be doing right now."

His arms tightened about her.

"That's what I mean," she murmured. "Much more important."

18

BACKSTAGE everyone was calm, untroubled by the feverish nervousness which had infected all of them seven nights before on opening night, when Wad Brown was still alive, when Nina was still waiting for her baby to come. From out front came a steady, rising hum of voices, like the susurrations of swarming insects. Ross peered through the crack in the curtain. The house was full, even for the last night.

"Places, everybody! Places, please!"

Beyond the curtain the voices subsided to a hush broken by scattered coughs and a shifting of bodies as the house lights went down. Ross walked quickly and silently up the darkened side aisle to the back of the house. The scene was still impressive when the curtain rose. Ravaged and desolate, the ramparts of Elsinore awaited the

appearance of the ghost. A single reactive sigh united the audience. The moment seemed to cancel all the mistakes he had made.

*"The time is out of joint:—O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!"*

At the first intermission applause rolled through the house like crashing surf. Ross went outside before the house lights came on and made his way backstage. Only Basil Selby held apart from him. Everyone else was still friendly.

The second act built steadily to a peak of emotional intensity. *"For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ."* There was a stunned hush as the second curtain slowly came down. The house lights came on for intermission as loud applause swept toward the stage.

"Good," Ross muttered to himself. "Perfect."

His own emotions were caught in the spell gripping the spectators he had worked to move. Trying to get backstage, he found himself recognized and stopped by a number of people. He sought to escape, embarrassed by the unrestrained praise. He muttered his gratitude and moved forward again and then stopped short, confronted by Langdon Garth.

The man dominated those about him by his very stature. He stood in the aisle in a white summer suit. It seemed to clothe him in an elephantine dapper quality. He looked at once massive and effete, his self-indulgent mouth indefinably arrogant beneath the clenched strength of his fleshy nose. He extended his blunt, jeweled hand in a firm, dry, unyielding grip.

"May I congratulate you again?"

"I'm glad you like it."

"Perhaps you ought to let me finish," Garth said dryly. "I want to congratulate you on your astuteness in hoodwinking your audience. You've given them the commonplace horror and excitement they wanted—or so they think. I dare say I'm the only one here who appreciates your little trick."

"Trick?" Despite himself, Ross said, "You don't mean the king —"

"So I was right!" Garth laughed gustily. "I suspected you had purloined a trait or two from my dubious character. But that isn't what I referred to. That's your privilege, not a trick. It's your right as an artist to steal from life and improve upon it."

"What about my so-called trick? I still don't——"

"Surely you can't deny you've offered a plea for nihilism in the guise of a dime-novel thriller?"

"That depends on your personal interpretation," Ross said. "I don't think it was written into the script."

"There are many things in your *Hamlet* which Shakespeare never thought of." The unwavering dark eyes bore into him. "I'd like very much to discuss the subject in detail with you."

"I've merely directed a play. I don't pretend to be an Elizabethan scholar."

"God forbid." The hooded lids drooped momentarily. "I want to talk to you, anyway. Come and see me."

It was a matchless opportunity. Garth was one of the unknown factors in the equation that thus far defied solution. Mac would have rejoiced with profane succinctness if he had overheard the invitation. But there was something unpleasant about Garth. His big-bodied suaveness had an inexplicable repugnant quality. Ross found it difficult to play up to him.

Garth waited, vast, brooding, imperious as a well-fed god. "Tomorrow, shall we say?"

"Well . . ." Ross fought vainly against his aversion, knowing he should seize the opportunity offered to him. "If I'm not tied up——"

"I'll expect you." Garth took a card from his pocket and scribbled on it. "Here's my number. Call me before you come out."

It was too late to refuse. The warning buzzer for the last act rasped across the bubbling gossip of intermission. It was too late to go backstage for the final checkup.

During the last act Ross was inattentive. His mind wandered constantly away from the stage, turning each time to Garth and his insistent hospitality. There had to be a reason for his cordiality. Why the sudden friendliness? Undoubtedly the man had his motives, but they remained obscure.

*" . . . so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause . . . "*

At last the curtain was down.

While people grasped his hand and pumped his arm and slapped his shoulder in hearty approbation, Ross looked helplessly around, seeking Karen. More hands seized his limp fingers. He nodded deaf agreement to the voices buzzing around him. Then he found himself grinning sheepishly, self-deprecatingly at Karen. She was watching him from the door, slim, fragile, tantalizingly cool in a white summer frock. He mumbled unintelligible apologies and broke away from his well-wishers and made his way to her up the crowded aisle.

"Let's get out of here!"

The headlights of a passing car swept across their faces as they reached the convertible at the foot of the flagstoned steps. Karen seemed transformed by the fierce fleeting moonlight. She was radiant with happiness, charged with a new excited eagerness.

"Darling, it's still perfect!"

"Was the last act really all right?"

"Ross, it's perfect!"

"I'm glad," he said. "I didn't see it."

"Didn't see——" Her voice rose. "But you were there!"

"I met Langdon Garth during the last intermission. I found myself thinking about him all through the last act. He wants me to visit him tomorrow."

"Oh." Her vivacity flagged. "Are you going?"

"I don't know. The man repels me. Some instinct in me won't let me like him."

"Well, let's forget him for now. I thought we could go out in the *Spray*."

When they pulled in at the driveway, lamplight overflowed from the living-room windows. Karen drove into the garage, parking beside her father's business sedan. They embraced and kissed and then drew apart.

"We'd better not get started," she said. "Let's go in and see Dad."

Dr. James was reading on the divan in the living room. He put his book aside and removed his glasses, rubbing his drawn gray eyes. His white hair was combed limply back from his lined forehead, like the forlorn crest of a bedraggled cockatoo. Laugh wrinkles corrugated the weathered skin about his eyes in interlacing folds as he looked up at them.

"Congratulations, young man." Peering up from Karen's embrace, he shook hands with Ross. "I've heard a lot about your play. I wish I'd found time to see it."

"Thank you, sir."

He wrinkled tangled brows at them. "No celebration now it's all over?"

"We thought we'd celebrate alone," said Karen. "We're going out on the *Spray* for a little while."

"Well, if it's a celebration, you'll have to serve wine. If you're not too lazy, you can go down the cellar and get one of those bottles of chablis the Fitzroys gave me four years ago. There's nobody to appreciate chablis around here. Maybe you two can do it justice. But just one bottle, mind you."

"One bottle it is!" Again Karen clasped her arms about his neck. "Entertain him, Mr. Nichols. I'll go get it before he changes his mind."

The instant they were alone Ross felt ill at ease. The doctor's face was quietly quizzical. It was a weathered face, as if tempered

by a knowledge of the frailties of mankind, mellowed by sympathy and understanding.

"I've been meaning to meet you and congratulate you on your levelheadedness in delivering Nina Blair's baby."

"Thank you, sir."

"It isn't an easy matter to keep calm in the face of unexpected childbirth. The average individual goes to pieces when he's confronted with it. I suspect birth is even more frightening than death. And with good reason, of course."

Ross made no answer. The doctor sat back, cigar in hand. Ross watched him strike a match and light the shaped end, puffing fragrant smoke in fat blue clouds.

"Dr. James, I'd like to thank you for helping my friend——"

"Mmmm?"

"MacFarland."

"Oh yes . . ." The doctor rolled his cigar between stubby, capable fingers. "Karen asked me to do what I could."

"I want you to know we're both grateful. I don't know if you know how it all started——"

The doctor examined his cigar, smiling to himself, very much as Karen smiled. "To tell you the truth, young man——"

"Here it is, Dad!" Karen was back in the room, cradling the bottle of wine in her arms. "You're sure you want us to have it?"

Her father left his remark about Mac unfinished. "If you'll promise to drink it like civilized beings . . ."

"You know we will."

"Don't dare put ice in it or mix it with anything else. You can cool it over the side until you're ready to drink it, but don't do anything else to it." He rose from the couch. "Now scat before you wear me out with your idiotic chatter." Suffering himself to be kissed soundly again, he held out his hand to Ross. "Never have a daughter, young man. They're all children of Lilith."

With the wine bottle resting in the crook of her arm, Karen took Ross by the hand. Sequin-bright stars glittered overhead as they

went down the pier to the launch. Their resounding footsteps were matched in liquid echoing by the slap and fall of the water against the pier stakes.

The *Spray* pulled away from the pier in a phosphorescent churning of water. The engines throbbed with tremendous, disciplined power. Ross lighted a cigarette and then sat smoking, listening to the water slap against the boat as they moved forward, throttled down to low speed.

"What did Dad say to you?"

"We didn't have time to say much of anything. I kept wondering how much he knows about us. It bothered me because I don't know what you've told him."

"Darling, I don't have to tell him anything. Dad doesn't say much. He just seems to take in everything in a curious kind of osmosis. I suspect that in our own case——"

Her last words were lost in the mounting roar of a fast-moving power cruiser, running without lights, somewhere off to starboard in the starlit darkness. She broke off, looking around. Then she cried out as the unseen boat abruptly became visible, looming up at express-train speed, cutting across their bow at a perilous angle, rocking the *Spray* in the rollers made by its passing.

The *Spray* bounced flatly and heavily in the trough left by the other craft's wake while Karen fought with the wheel to prevent their capsizing. The launch roared away into the dark, still without lights of any description. They heard a chuckle float back across the water, as though in response to some witticism uttered by someone on the cruiser.

"Nice navigating," said Ross. "You have many drunken mariners on Lake Teresa?"

"I—I don't know." Karen paused to catch her breath. "It's something I've never had to worry about before."

"Probably city slickers."

"I doubt it," she said slowly. "I recognize that boat now. It belongs to Langdon Garth."

"Are you sure?"

"It's the only one like it on the lake. Its size, the shape of its hull, the sound of its engines . . ."

"Garth doesn't seem to be the type to run around in a power launch, drunk as a hoot owl."

"Maybe not. But I'm sure it's his boat." She slackened speed. "Well, they're gone now. . . ."

Nearing the island, they circled it, keeping close to its shore. The upthrust tip of woodland seemed oddly sinister in the darkness. No other boats were there.

After they had anchored to leeward, Karen knelt on the deck, looking down at him, her hands on his shoulders. She had recovered her poise. At the same time she had lost the gravity which had descended on them. Again her vivacious mood was in the ascendancy. Mischievous lurked in the tilt of her voice, the tilt of her chin.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Before we sample your father's chablis?"

"What, sir? Do you prefer intoxication to osculation?"

"If you'll lean a mite closer—" Dropping his shoulders suddenly, Ross made her lose her balance. "Maybe we can equate the two."

Laughing, Karen fell forward into his arms, her opened mouth tilted upward. Their lips met. Her laughter died. She lay content in his arms, her mouth soft and eager.

"Darling, darling . . ." Her fingers trailed gently across his lips. "Maybe now we can have our wine."

The chablis was dry on the tongue, almost tart before it began to permeate head and body alike with a delicate glow.

"Sweetheart . . ." Karen put her glass on the deck and nestled against him. They lay lazily back against the seat cushions. She rested her head against his shoulder, sighing. "What are you going to do now?"

"My future, you mean? Or right now?"

She shifted in his arms to see his face. The gentle breeze from

the water ruffled her hair under his fingers. Wordlessly she pulled his head down. He kissed her, drawing her closer, stirred by the complete surrender in her response.

Afterward, with the wildness over, succeeded by the slow emergence from serene, drifting lassitude, they listened to the stealthy creeping of the water against the hull.

"Now you can talk about the future," Karen murmured. "You can even fill my glass again. . . ." She lay at ease in his arms, her flank smooth and slender under the slow, caressing movement of his hand. "I wish it could always be like this. I wish we weren't what we are."

"What does that mean?"

The water nibbled at the side of the boat.

"I've got to talk about Alex and Peggy Fuller and your brother," she said gravely. "After you told me all about Mac last night, I read over all my clippings of the case this afternoon. I never liked Peggy, you know. It was even more than that. I hated her."

"Why? Because she'd married Alex?" Ross waited several moments. "Nina told me she thought you'd been in love with her brother. She thought he was in love with you, too, but both of you were too shy to do anything about it."

"It's true," Karen said with quiet bitterness. "Neither of us knew the truth until it was too late. Then Alex knew he was trapped for good. Peggy was already pregnant. But it wasn't his child. She was pregnant when she tricked him into marrying her."

"So Mac was right," Ross said. "That freckle-faced little tramp, he called her last night."

Karen nodded. "Alex told me about it two days before they were killed. They were already having arguments—or at least Peggy was trying to goad him into senseless fights. She'd always been that way, even as a child. In high school she was always unpredictable. I remember stories about her that seemed incredible at the time. Later I realized only part of the truth about her had ever come into the open."

"How did Alex Fuller feel about her the last time you talked to him?"

"I le was angrier than I'd ever known him. It was enough to make me wonder if he'd killed her when I came across her body."

"You came across her body?" Ross spoke slowly, with curious thickness, almost stupidly. "But your name isn't mentioned in anything I've read about the case—and you never once suggested——"

"I've never told anybody about it." All at once she was crying. Her tears dismayed him. She cried silently in his arms, her huddled body moving in poignant betrayal of her sobbing, her tears hot and wet against his hand. "That's why everything went wrong between us. I felt so guilty. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. I've kept it hidden so long I couldn't bring myself to speak out, especially to you."

"Why especially to me?"

"Because I'm convinced your brother must have killed Alex and Peggy."

Ross stiffened. Despite himself, his hands drew away from her. He heard himself speak in a tight, shallow voice.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I saw Peggy and Alex just before they were killed. Maybe only fifteen minutes or so beforehand. I'd driven to Greenridge that morning for my father. On my way back I passed Alex and Peggy on the county road. Their car was parked just off the road, a little over a mile before the Three Points cutoff. They were sitting in the car, arguing. Peggy Fuller was doing all the talking, like the most vicious kind of shrew. I stepped on the gas as I went past them. By the time I drove past Eunice Barrow's stand I was really going fast, getting madder and madder about what I'd seen and what it represented. I felt so mad I knew I couldn't face Dad right away, so I took a side road to the lake and drove down to the shore. I got out of the car and walked along the sand and pitied myself and Alex and hated the girl he'd married."

"Do you know what time you passed the Fullers?"

"About ten-fifteen, I think. I remember looking at my watch on the beach. It was ten-thirty then."

"What time did you leave?"

"A few minutes before eleven. Before then, though, I'd heard a car back in the trees. I didn't pay much attention to it. A few minutes before that I'd heard a car backfire, so I took it for granted someone had driven off the side road to turn around and get back to the highway."

She stopped for a moment. Her body shuddered in his embrace. She forced herself to go on.

"When I started back to the convertible, I knew it wasn't a car I'd heard backfire. I found Peggy Fuller lying dead in the clearing, a bullet through her head, her blouse ripped away from her shoulder, her body still warm. I almost fainted. Then I thought of Alex. I was sure he'd done it. Even the gentlest person can be goaded into murder. Panic took hold of me. I ran blindly for my car and drove back to the highway. I remember looking at my watch again. It was eleven o'clock. Three minutes later, going full speed, I came across a small crowd on the highway. They were gathered about Wad Brown, of course, who'd shot your brother just a few minutes before. As everybody milled around, that man from Greenridge drove up with Eunice Barrow. He'd come across Alex dead on the county road where I'd seen Alex and Peggy arguing. That was when I knew Alex hadn't killed her. I still didn't faint, but when I got home I was sick before I could get out of the car."

Ross felt icy-cold, inside and out. "Why are you so sure my brother killed the two of them?"

"Eunice Barrow saw Peggy Fuller drive by with him after I'd driven past her stand. I thought I'd heard a car backfire shortly after ten-thirty. Now I know it wasn't a car. It was a gunshot. Just a minute or two later I did hear a car turn around. That was your brother driving back to the highway. The tire marks proved it. His car ran out of gas about two miles away. Wad Brown said he saw him and shot him at ten fifty-eight."

"Did you hear those particular shots?"

"No. I was driving fast and scared to death. What with the noise of the car and my emotional state and everything else——" She seized his hand. "Ross, believe me, I wish your brother hadn't done it! But what other explanation is there? That's why I could never talk to you about it!"

"Why did you keep so quiet about it from the beginning?"

She recoiled from the bitter edge in his voice. "Now you hate me."

"I don't hate you. I just want to know the truth."

"I—I was frightened," she said. "I—I didn't know what to do. After I got home I tried to make up my mind about it. Then I let my cowardice get the best of me. I decided the case was already closed and that nothing I might say would change matters, so I simply kept quiet."

The breeze off the water seemed to have become colder.

"Who was Peggy Fuller pregnant by?"

"I—I don't know."

"Are you sure?"

"Ross, it won't help to bring that up now. That's why I——"

"Who was it? Did Alex know?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Peggy told him. He suspected Wad Brown. But it wasn't. It was Langdon Garth."

At last they set about their departure, silent, as though hushed and chastened by weariness. Ross drew up the anchor, coiling the thin, dripping hawser on the deck. Karen took her place at the wheel. The engines grumbled underfoot, like purring beasts awaking reluctantly from sleep. To the east of them, no more than a hundred yards away, the island still brooded in dark, forbidding malevolence. They began to circle it, preparing to return to the house.

Karen shivered. On an impulse she switched on the searchlight above the engine cowling. Its beam pierced the darkness like a bright highway, lighting up the shale and the scrub pine of the narrow

shore in unrelieved white and black. The boat began to drift toward the beach. She shifted into low gear, guiding it away from the island. The spotlight described a brilliant white swath, fixing in its glare a night bird frozen with fright. But their range of vision took in more than the bird. She lifted her arm, pointing toward the stark outline of a crude wooden cross set up in a little clearing on the edge of the lighted area.

"Ross!"

A man hung limply from the crossbars, his wrists and ankles bound with ropes, his body spread-eagled. He was naked in the cruel glare of the spotlight.

19

"MY GOD . . ." Ross turned sharply. "Get closer!"

Instantly Karen swung the boat about and headed it slowly into shallow water.

As the bow scraped the pebbled bottom, Ross threw off his shoes in the cockpit and let himself over the side with a hushed splash. His flesh flinched under the impact of the cold water. He waded quickly toward the beach. Once onshore, he ran, dodging the stones and broken branches lying black and bare as fossilized patterns on the sand, hurrying toward the crossed poles and their sagging burden.

As he came closer, he saw who it was—the thin, drooping body, the dark, close-curved hair . . . David Gershowitz, stripped of his clothes, his eyes desperate and pleading above a rag stuffed into his mouth and tied about his face with a cord.

"Can I help?" Karen called out from the boat, her voice echoing thinly across the water. "Do you need me?"

"No! Stay where you are!"

The cross leaned against a stripped young oak, its base concealed by a loose sheeting of dirt, as though someone had attempted to dig a hole for the pole and then had abandoned the idea.

Ross moved quickly, gauging the hanging man's weight, balancing it in his mind against his own strength. He crouched between the tree and the leaning pole, then pushed against the cross with his shoulder while he clasped it firmly with his hands. The pole began to waver. The naked body swung on it limply, with sickening looseness. Another effort, another spurt of strength—the cross came clear of the tree, bearing heavily upon his shoulder. His body trembled under the weight. He forced himself backward, step by step, bringing the lashed poles gently and slowly toward the ground.

All at once the cross slipped from his shoulder. It crashed to the ground, grinding the bound man's ankles and wrists against the hard, pebbled sand. A groan came from behind the gag.

Stooping quickly, Ross took the gag from the sick-eyed face. The wide, loose mouth was bleeding. Blood trickled from the torn flesh like a crawling worm.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"Untie me. Get me away from here."

"What happened?" Ross worked swiftly, tearing at the tangled knots. "Who did it?"

David Gershowitz made no answer. The prominent rib cage of his fleshless chest expanded and fell in deep, throbbing intensity. Ross looked at him, then looked away, working at the knots. The younger man was crying with shame and anger. The tears rolled down his cheeks, escaping from his brimming eyes.

"Get me out of here," he said. "Let me get home."

Ross straightened, helping him struggle to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"I'm all right. Get me home. My uncle . . ."

"Not too fast. We'll get you there."

"Max . . . If they did anything to him . . ."

Keeping his arm about him for support, Ross led him across the

beach. They splashed clumsily in the cold, rippling water. Gershowitz began to shiver violently, his nerves and muscles out of hand. Karen was watching them from the *Spray*. Its twin engines muttered croupily in the water, vibrating softly in the lapping movement of the tiny waves.

"This side," Karen called. "I'll help you in."

"Never mind," Ross said loudly. "Get clothes. A towel. Whatever's dry."

Karen turned to the cabin as they reached the launch. Ross held it steady while the other clambered awkwardly over the side. The launch rocked slightly, scraping bottom. Ross waited until it steadied itself. Then he pulled himself aboard, his feet wet and slippery on the deck. Gershowitz sat hunched against the leather cushions in the cockpit, head bent, his thin, naked body still shivering with shock.

"Here's a towel and a pair of Dad's slacks," Karen said from inside the cabin.

Ross looked inside. "Stay here a minute, will you? It's David Gershowitz. I don't think he'd want you to see him just yet." He took the clothing from her and turned back to Gershowitz. Silently he began to rub the man's trembling legs with the towel. The other tried feebly to take the towel from him. "Take it easy." Ross worked briskly with the towel. "Take that wine beside you. It'll help you."

Gershowitz poured the chablis into the glass with trembling hands. Drops splashed on his thin, hairy belly. He drank it cautiously, almost painfully. But it helped him regain control. His shivering lessened.

Ross threw the towel aside on the seat and handed him the slacks. "Put these on. I'll see if we have anything else."

He ducked his head inside the cabin. Karen handed up a wrinkled T-shirt and then joined him on the deck. They waited until Gershowitz pulled the ribbed jersey over his head.

"What happened?" Ross demanded. "When'd they do this?"

"What time is it now?"

Karen looked at her wrist under the starboard running light. "Quarter to one."

"Almost two hours ago. I was walking home when they grabbed me. I'd been walking around town for some time."

"Who grabbed you?"

"I don't know. They kept their faces hidden. Three or four of them. They drove me down to the shore and threw me in their cruiser."

"Then what?"

"They took me out to the island and warned me to get out of town and take my uncle with me. When I wanted to know why, one of them hit me across the mouth." Gershowitz touched his torn lip in wary exploration. "Then they stripped me—and then——" He halted. "One of them had a knife. He threatened to—to cut me. . . ."

"Were they drunk?"

"I don't know," he said wearily. "Will you take me home? I'm worried about my uncle. I've got to get home!"

Karen took her place behind the wheel. The screw spun in the water, churning angry foam. She switched off the searchlight. The island became a dark, sprawling mass, receding into the night as they roared away toward the pier.

"We'll drive you home," Karen said when they docked.

"No, thanks." Although the night air was heavy with heat, undisturbed by the breeze they had known on the water, David Gershowitz shivered. "I can manage now. . . ."

"You can't go home alone in this state," Ross said. "We'll drive you."

The streets were deserted. Their headlights surprised an occasional cat prowling the pavements, but no one strolled under the shadowed elms and lindens. The cars outside the tourist houses were empty. Not a single car was parked under the patriotic bunting on Main Street. Neon lights burned like open wounds in the store windows.

"Aren't you going to do anything about this?" Karen demanded. "Aren't you going to the police?"

David Gershowitz looked at her. "What good would that do? You can't fight this thing alone. I never intended to come back here to live. I'll make Max sell out and move in with relatives in Chicago."

The convertible stopped outside the dry-cleaning shop. The red-and-white pole outside the neighboring barbershop revolved with silent indefatigability. Ross thought of Mac sitting in the chair, a towel about his neck, asking the casual questions exposing the town's bigotry. He swore silently as he opened the car door.

"I'll come up with you."

"There's no need."

"I'll come up. Just to make sure."

David Gershowitz shrugged helplessly and stepped down. "Thank you, Miss James. I'll return the clothes later."

He turned quickly away before she could answer, and opened the side door leading to the apartment above the shop.

Under the hanging light illuminating the ascending hallway the landing at the head of the stairs was bare, deserted.

"Who did it?" Ross asked as they climbed the stairs.

The other shook his head in bleak negation.

"What kind of boat did they have? A cabin cruiser?"

"Yes. One of them said, 'We should've rammed the bastards,' and one of the others laughed." His eyes tightened with suspicion when Ross nodded. "How did you know that?"

"You almost ran us down," Ross said. "Are you sure you didn't recognize any of them?"

"I've already told you——"

"Why did you lie about those anonymous notes? Did somebody threaten you and warn you not to talk?"

"Not anybody personally. Just another note." His hand gingerly touched his cut lip. "Just stay out of this, Nichols. Don't try anything. You need real unity to fight this kind of thing, and I don't think you can get it in this town."

Ross rapped at the door at the head of the stairs. "You'd better see if your uncle's all right."

They waited, not talking, watching one another. Ross knocked again. There was a remote, equivocal shuffling sound behind the door, followed by the click of a light switch. They heard the scuffling of flapping slippers.

"Who's there?" called a voice still vague with sleep.

"It's me, Max. I forgot my key."

Ross heard the scrape of the night latch being unlocked as he went outside. Down below he found Karen waiting anxiously in the convertible.

"Is his uncle all right?"

"Yes. There's nothing to worry about." Ross stood at the curb. "You'd better go home."

"I'll drive you to Julian's."

"I'm not going home right away. I want to see MacFarland and talk this over with him."

"Ross, you won't do anything rash?"

"There's nothing anybody can do at the moment."

Karen shuddered. "It's horrible. I still can't believe it's happened."

"The impossible has been happening for years," Ross said. "Now you know what those *Restricted* signs can develop into. Maybe you can ask your father about the special fund for seeing that Negroes get out of town." His voice sharpened angrily. "Max Gershowitz has been getting anonymous warnings. Whoever wrote them was on that boat."

"But surely Langdon Garth—"

"Why couldn't Garth be behind it? Why not anybody here?"

"I was thinking of something else," Karen said slowly. "I've had anonymous warnings too. I meant to tell you tonight."

"What?"

"I've had phone calls from someone who knew I discovered Peggy Fuller's body in that clearing. I could never identify the voice, but I'm sure it wasn't Langdon Garth."

"You mean the calls have stopped?"

"Yes. I've an idea it might've been Slop Slasher. He was driving around on his motorcycle in the same general area the morning of the murders."

"Well, Slasher doesn't have anything to do with what's happened tonight. . . ." Opening the car door, Ross took his place beside her. "Let me off at the Lighthouse. It's close to the motel, and I can use some coffee. I'll call Mac from there."

Several transport trucks were drawn up outside the roadside stand. They were grouped like boats at anchor under the whitewashed superstructure of the pseudo-lighthouse. The convertible was dwarfed by their commingled shadows, like a trim sloop beside cargoed freighters.

"Hurry home," he said. "I wish I could talk it over with you, but this has to be with MacFarland."

"I know, darling. Good night."

He waited until the convertible had gone before he entered Al's Lighthouse. The truck drivers sat hunched at the circular counter, chewing pie and hamburgers, listening to the thumping din emanating from the livid glow of the juke box. The air was oppressively close, saturated with cooking odors. He fingered the coins in his pocket and found a dime, then stepped inside the booth beyond the juke box.

After he had dialed the Vista Motel, he waited for the ringing to stop. But no one answered his call. The anger simmering in him threatened to overflow. Where was the manager? Why didn't someone answer? The anger in him had to be satisfied with action. He hung up angrily and waited for his dime to be returned and then dialed again, remembering the laughter on the cruiser roaring across the *Spray's* bow, thinking of the cross and its burden crashing to the ground.

Sweat began to trickle down his back as he waited in the suffocating heat, listening to the spaced rings.

"Hello? Garth speaking."

He returned the calling card with the number scribbled on it to his pocket. "I've changed my mind. I think I'd like to see you."

The rich, supercilious voice was charged with puzzlement. "Who is this?"

"Ross Nichols."

"Oh . . ." The pause was only momentary. "Well, splendid! When would you like to come out?"

"Tonight?"

"Well, it's a little unexpected . . ." The rich voice trailed away, then came back strong and hearty. "Evidently we're both of the late-to-bed school." His deep laugh mingled with the contrapuntal humming of the wire. "However, talk's always best after midnight, don't you think? When may I expect you?"

"I'm calling from the Lighthouse. I'll have to walk."

"Not at all. I'll pick you up."

"All right," Ross said. "I'll start walking on the lake road."

20

WHEN he started out along the highway, he had only his anger to sustain him. While his heels struck the pavement in quick, light succession, echoing in sharp counterrhythm to the whirring of the night insects in the fields along the road, he thought of Karen and hoped she had gone straight home. Then he thought of Mac. He wished he had been able to reach MacFarland. But it was too late to do anything about it. He had already committed himself. He kept on walking.

One of the trucks he had seen at Al's Lighthouse approached him from the rear. Its headlights washed like foaming surf over the road ahead of him. He stepped aside into the columbine and burdocks as the truck rumbled past him. Then the highway was empty again,

with the cicadas and crickets singing with unflagging zeal in the darkness.

He walked another five minutes before Garth met him. His knee was beginning to burn with little flashes of pain. He came to an ascending curve in the road. Above him headlights swept around the tree-screened bend, then dipped toward him, fixing him in their glare. He halted as Garth pulled to a stop on the opposite side of the road.

"Good evening," said Garth. "Or should I say good morning?" He loomed huge and impressive behind the wheel of the British runabout. "I'm afraid I've made you trudge quite a distance."

"I needed the exercise."

"Well, jump in. We'll be back at my place in a jiffy."

Silently Ross took his place beside the vast, well-tailored figure. Garth still wore the white summer suit which had given him an air of gigantic foppishness at the playhouse. The soft glow of the instrument panel lighted up his massive face, transforming his fleshy features into the baffling imperturbability of a squatting idol. Ross watched his blunt hands twist the steering wheel in a quick U-turn.

For a little while both were silent while they rode. The car seemed to consume space with voracious speed. Garth handled the wheel with careless ease. They rounded a banked curve at a speed a shade too high for safety. Garth smiled at the faint, whining protest of whirling rubber as the car veered away from the pavement edge, barely avoiding an ugly drop into the roadside ditch. Beyond the frilled silhouettes of the pines along the curve the lake glinted in the starlight.

"The mystery of water at night," Garth murmured. "It never fails to fascinate me. Shall we stop a moment?"

They swung off the highway, following tire tracks leading through thinned-out trees toward a brief stretch of beach. Garth braked to a sudden stop and cut the ignition switch and then turned off the lights. Only the dashboard remained illuminated.

They sat in the half-dark, listening to the soft liquid ebb and flow of the lake.

"Relentless and impersonal beauty," Garth said. "All water has it. . . ." Then he laughed softly. "But enough of that. I'm interested to know why you decided to see me. Or do you prefer to drive on to the house first? I've some passable cognac if you find that helps your conversation."

For the first time Ross realized he had been drinking. His breath was heavy with alcohol when he turned, his arm flung carelessly along the back of the seat.

"I don't need a drink," Ross said bluntly. "I wanted to ask you about David Gershowitz."

Garth hesitated. "So that's why you're here."

"That's why I'm here."

Garth sighed. "How did you happen to find out about our Polish friend?"

"I came across him by accident."

"You mean you were out with the doctor's girl."

"I see you've been filled in on my activities."

"One never knows when such information may prove useful. Incidentally, Gershowitz was warned not to talk."

"He didn't. I simply put two and two together after I found him. It wasn't difficult to identify your cruiser, but it was harder to decide why you'd want to become involved in the worst kind of bigotry."

"Bigotry is a useful weapon in the right hands," the big man said blandly. "In addition, of course, a man is permitted to indulge an occasional whim."

"My God, does degradation of a man's spirit actually amuse you?" Ross felt his anger spill over, hot and uncontrolled. "Hasn't the poor devil's family suffered enough? There's Arch Gilman and his flag-cleaning every week—"

"I'm aware of that. It's one of Gilman's personal whims. None too subtle, I must confess."

"Do you know about the anonymous notes as well?"

"Edgar Selby's handiwork, if you must know. His talents are few, so one can understand his proud excursions into illiteracy."

"What date have you set for Lake Teresa's annual pogrom?"

Garth smiled. "Your emotionalism would be quite useful if it were directed into the proper channels. To be frank with you, I'm sorry to see our meeting take this turn. I had hoped to talk to you about more pleasant matters. I felt we had a great deal in common."

Ross made an angry, inarticulate gesture of disagreement.

"Aren't you being a trifle unrealistic?" the white-suited man demanded. "If you were to begin denying the existence of those with whom you disagree for ethical and moral reasons, you would have to withdraw from the human race."

"I've been tempted before now to hand in my resignation."

"Forget your sentimentality, my boy." Garth's words slurred together, betraying his drunkenness. "A number of us manhandled the Gershowitz fellow. Gilman, Selby, Mowrer, if you must know. I'm quite sure Gershowitz would never press charges even if he did recognize us. I'm equally sure the treatment won't have to be repeated. Consequently it's absurd for us to waste our time on the matter."

"Didn't you think I wanted to talk about that when I called you?"

"Obviously not. I had expressed my admiration for your work. With unaccountable naïveté I assumed you wished to discuss it with me. I was fully prepared to offer you my assistance."

"In what way?"

"My circle of acquaintances isn't confined to Lake Teresa, you know. My tastes incline toward the theater. I've friends on Broadway, in Hollywood, in radio and television. I can assure you it's no trick at all for me to obtain entree for you on either coast."

"Why go to that trouble for someone you don't know?"

"I believe in helping those with talent. I think you're quite talented in your field. Indeed, you're worthy of subsidy." Garth nodded, patently amused by the effect of his words. "Oh yes. I was

fully prepared to go that far. I was willing to back you for a year, let us say, with no strings attached. If it seems like princely largess to you, let me disillusion you. In these days of organized tax robbery, it's a deductible expense, or so my attorneys tell me. In addition, of course, I've the concomitant pleasure of being a patron of the arts."

"What guarantee have you that I'd justify your faith in me?"

"I respect your work. That would be enough for me. As for our differences in the realm of ethics and morals—well, my offer is still open."

"Why not call it by its right name?" Ross asked. "Call it a bribe, and we'll know exactly where we stand."

"Why should I wish to bribe you?"

"You say you know all about me. It means you know why I came to Lake Teresa. You know I've tried to uncover the truth."

The big, wide-shouldered body shifted slightly. "Truth?"

"About the murders my brother was blamed for. Wad Brown killed him, but now Brown's dead, so I can't question him. Such a convenient death makes me wonder whether Brown was killed to prevent me from talking to him."

"Oh, now, please!" Garth laughed softly. "Your vocabulary smacks of paranoia. Persecution complexes and all that, I mean. Knowing you for a sentimentalist, I can understand your concern for your brother, but the unfortunate fact remains that he was guilty of murder."

"The fact also remains that he couldn't have killed Wad Brown. Dead men don't kill."

"But their survivors can," Garth said. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you're definitely under suspicion?"

"I didn't kill Brown. You know I didn't."

"Why should I know that?"

"For the reason you tried to bribe me. Because you did it."

The darkness stirred with a sudden breeze.

"That's a very foolish statement," Garth said softly. "Without

proof, which is something you can't possibly produce, you could never get anyone to believe you."

"Suppose I can prove it?"

"Impossible!"

"Is it?" Ross spoke slowly and deliberately. "I found out a good deal about the Fuller murders by asking questions. The same method brought results in Brown's case. Try these items on for size. Brown liked bourbon, but he'd been drinking cognac before he was killed. You're a cognac fancier yourself. Your initials were also found in his wallet. They referred to an engagement with you over the week end. Pollard thought *L. G.* meant LaVerne Gilman. I say they stand for Langdon Garth."

"Rot! Why should I want to kill Brown?"

"Blackmailers often push their victims a little too far."

"If you're implying I'm fair game for blackmail——"

"You've already tried to bribe me. You could've paid Brown extortion money for the same reason."

"For what reason?"

"Because Brown knew why you killed Alex Fuller."

"Damn you, stop that!" All of Garth's self-control exploded in quick rage. "How far do you think you'd get with your charges in court? Your case against me would never even get that far! Even if I told you I killed both Brown and Fuller, who would believe your unsupported testimony? It's my word against yours, my reputation against yours, my money against yours. My money outweighs everything else."

"You did kill them, didn't you?"

"Prove it! Prove it!"

"Well, first Wad Brown slept with Peggy Selby too——"

"Damn you!" Garth's reaction was startling in its immediacy. His big, jeweled hands gestured angrily. "You couldn't know that! You couldn't!"

"Everybody in town knows it," Ross said evenly. "You killed Alex Fuller because Alex knew you'd got his wife with child. But maybe

you were both wrong. Maybe Brown was responsible all the time."

"You bastard—no!"

Suddenly Garth fumbled in the door pocket beside him, slightly below seat level. When he straightened, he had a gun in his hand. It was a small black automatic, no bigger than a child's water pistol. It assumed sinister proportions in the starlight.

"Now perhaps you'll shut up." His voice was harsh and ragged. "You talk too much, Nichols, and at the wrong time. You're very much mistaken if you think I'll let you blab this to the world at large."

"Then I'm right," Ross said slowly. "You did kill him."

"Yes, damn you! I came across Fuller after I passed that little slut in the car with your brother. I couldn't resist stopping and taunting him about his wife's conduct. Ordinarily the poor fool was meeker than any mouse, but this time he sprang at me. The rest you know."

"But why weren't you seen by that Newsom fellow when he drove in from Greenridge?"

"There are several single-track roads farmers use between the Greenridge road and the road to Waunona. I took the first one into Waunona. No one ever saw me on the Greenridge road."

"How did you kill Peggy Fuller?"

"Don't be a fool! How could I get back past the Barrow woman to do it? Your brother killed the little bitch!"

"No! I still don't believe it!"

"Really?" Garth smiled sardonically. "What difference does it make now? What do you think——"

Ross hit him before he could finish. He struck out desperately, expecting Garth to squeeze the trigger in an instinctive reaction. But Ross's desperation lent him swiftness. He knocked Garth's hand aside with a chopping motion of his stiffened left hand, then brought his right arm under the other's arm and forced the automatic away from both of them. Garth grunted with surprise, then tried to counter the unexpected attack. But Ross already had his arm caught in a tightening wrist lock. The gun fell to the ground out-

side the car as Garth cried out. Ross released his grip and backed into the corner, fumbling for the handle behind him.

Outraged, heaving his vast bulk forward, Garth seized Ross by the arm. Ross tried to push him away, but the massive hands gripped both sleeves. Garth seemed overwhelmingly large at close range, still powerful despite his drinking. It was hard to foresee his actions. His silent struggling had an ugly relentlessness of purpose. Ross twisted his left sleeve free and jabbed a hard fist at his middle. Garth grunted with pain.

"God damn you," he muttered. "You're going to get what I gave Fuller."

"Try it," Ross said. "Just try it." With his free hand he fumbled behind him for the door handle. "If you think you can——"

Sliding his foot down to the ground, slipping in the sand, Ross pulled away from Garth and jabbed again at his middle. The big man still gripped him by the arm. Ross squirmed out of the car, wrenching his body from side to side, vainly trying to free himself as Garth stumbled after him, falling heavily against him. Twigs and fallen branches snapped underfoot as they scuffled in the sand.

"You did kill Brown, didn't you?" Ross persisted. "Blackmail——"

"Not just blackmail . . . laughed at me . . . told me about himself and that little bitch . . ." Panting, Garth summoned up new strength. "Now you—you too——"

All at once, fighting silently and grimly, panting with exertion and rage, Ross forced Garth backward in a sudden offensive flurry. Garth's foot sank unexpectedly in soft, yielding sand. Thrown off balance, Garth sought desperately to regain his footing, but he crashed forward to the ground. His head struck the bumper guard with a muffled thud. His body twisted brokenly at the middle. He fell in a shapeless heap on the sand and then lay motionless, tremendous as a felled Goliath.

After a long moment Ross forced himself to bend down through interminable space. Garth lay on his side, his heavy face relaxed in profile, his mouth slightly open. Ross felt heart and pulse. There

was no discernible beat. He straightened again, almost painfully, finding it difficult to breathe.

For a moment the world underfoot wheeled and tilted. Garth was dead. He was dead.

Ross had to fight for physical control, struggling to regain simple equilibrium. The giddiness passed. He looked down at his sweat-streaked hands and absently rubbed them against his trouser legs, only vaguely aware he did so, listening to his mind warning him to get away.

In the same instant a sudden movement in the nearby trees sent his heart racing. A night bird swooped in noiseless flight above him. His heartbeat slowly decelerated, but he still stood tense, holding his breath. Then he felt his eyes drawn toward the dead man at his feet. An instinctive compulsion to run welled up in him. He turned blindly from the car, fleeing along the cutoff road at a furtive, crouching run.

When he reached the highway, his breath came and went in jagged gasps. Pain darted with crippling intensity behind his knee-cap. He stumbled to a halt at the edge of the curving highway. Then headlights splashed around the screen of trees, transfixing him in their glare. He wanted to throw himself to the ground, to hide, to crawl away. He was helpless. The pain in his knee immobilized him. He heard the car's brakes squeal to a sudden stop.

"What's wrong, pal?" MacFarland called to him from beyond the lights. "What's up, Nichols?"

THE car drew onto the gravel shoulder off the highway. Its lights went out. The familiar outlines of Karen's convertible became visible in the starlight.

"Ross!" Karen called from behind the wheel. "Darling, what's happened?"

For a moment he was unable to answer. He still had difficulty in regaining his breath, and he felt sick with the pain numbing his knee. The car doors swung open. Both Karen and Mac hurried around the car to him.

"What's wrong, pal? What're you doing out here?"

"Garth . . ." Ross had to swallow against a sudden constriction in his throat. "He's dead. I killed him."

Karen gripped his arm convulsively. "Ross!"

"He's back there. We had a fight. Ironical, you might say. I'm not the kind who gets into public brawls, either, but Garth's dead."

The black eye patch robbed Mac of identity in the starlight. "How'd it happen? Why didn't you call me first?"

"I tried to, but nobody answered at the motel." Ross looked at Karen sharply, almost accusingly. "What are you doing here? You said you'd go straight home."

"I was worried about your reaction. I drove over to the motel and found Mac still up, busy writing. I started to tell him what happened while we waited for your phone call. When it didn't come in, we decided something had gone wrong. We drove back to the Lighthouse, but you weren't there, so then we started toward Langdon Garth's place."

"Yeah," Mac said. "We're lucky we ran into you. A few seconds either way and we'd've missed you." He glanced up and down the empty highway. "Let's get off the road. We don't want anybody knowing we're here."

"What difference does it make now? I've killed him."

"Cut that out, Nichols. Nothing's ever that simple. We've got to go back and look at him first."

Ross shook his head. "I don't want Karen mixed up in this. She's got to get out of here."

Her hand closed tightly about his arm. "Ross, don't. You ought to know you can't get rid of me now."

Mac nodded briskly. "She's right, pal. Let's get back to Garth."

There was no possibility of argument. They turned back to the convertible. Ross sat next to Karen at the wheel. On his right Mac lighted a cigarette and then handed it to him. The car started forward.

"Don't turn on the lights," Mac said. "Take it easy and drive in the dark."

The convertible moved slowly along the wheel tracks leading through the thinned-out trees.

At last they reached the British runabout. The sleek black car stood like a beetle poised for flight on the starlit sand. They stepped down from the convertible and moved slowly around the smaller machine. Garth lay in a huddled heap near the front bumper. His body seemed huge and sprawling in his white summer suit, like a discarded bag of laundry.

Mac bent down for several moments.

"It's no lie," he said softly. "He's a goner."

"Ross!" Karen cried out involuntarily. Then she sought to control herself. "It—it can't be. . . ."

"I told you. Go home. I don't want you involved."

"It's too late for that now. You need help. We've got to help you."

Mac stared thoughtfully at the fallen figure at their feet. "How did it happen, Nichols?"

"There's no need for that," Ross said bitterly. "I'll have to tell it to Pollard."

"Come off it!" Mac reacted with uncommon anger. "What makes you think you have to put your head on the chopping block? You got sore when you thought Chuck had been played for a patsy, didn't you? Why the hell are you so eager to play the same role yourself?"

"Chuck hadn't killed anybody. I have."

"Why not let us decide that? The condition you're in, for God's sake, you don't know if you're coming or going. Now tell us exactly what was said and what took place!"

Again argument was out of the question. Ross began at the beginning, with his call to Garth from Al's Lighthouse. Their motionless shadows lay athwart the dead man like discarded shrouds. The soft ebb and flow of the water sighed against the beach. The sound of his voice competed with the trilling insects in the darkness. There was no sound of traffic on the highway.

"You didn't kill him, Ross!" Karen reacted instantly to his description of their struggle. "It was self-defense!"

"How can I prove it? Now I know how right he was. If he were alive, it would be my word against his, my reputation against his, my money against his. Now that he's dead, I'll have an even harder time to make anybody believe me."

"I'll testify for you! I'll make them believe you!"

"It wouldn't hold up. You weren't even a witness."

"I'll say I was! I'll tell them I was with you!"

Mac shook his head. "That's out. Don't even think about perjurying yourself." He scowled at the figure crumpled on the sand. "It was accidental—manslaughter at the most—but try to prove it in this town. Pollard needs a new patsy now that Slop Slasher's out of the Brown mess. You're the perfect candidate, pal."

"How do you mean Slasher's out of it?"

Mac fidgeted with the patch over his empty eye socket and then spat over the lifeless body into the sand. "I saw LaVerne tonight. She's getting out of town. She said Pollard heard from Pittsburgh this afternoon. Slop got himself knifed and robbed in some fleabag there. It seems he'd run off with dough from the hotel till. He thought he was kicking off and babbled like a loon. Told all about making anonymous phone calls to Karen, for one thing. She can give you the details later."

"Never mind that," Karen said impatiently. "Slop was seen in Milwaukee while Brown was still alive. That's the important thing."

"LaVerne also told me it was Garth who sicked Gilman onto me yesterday," Mac added. "Looks like the late-lamented had many a finger in many a pie." He bent over Garth, gripped him under the

arms, and raised him to a sitting position on the sand. "Let's get rid of this carrion."

"Are you out of your mind? We can't cover this up!"

"We've got to, pal. Look at him." The heavy features were swollen, puffed by the blows Ross had struck in his uncontrollable spurt of anger. The nose seemed twisted; a spreading bruise discolored the left cheek. "Can you picture a jury's reaction to photos of him like this? You wouldn't stand a chance, Nichols, and you could have Brown's murder pinned on you in the bargain. We've got to do a thorough job of having him knocked off in an accident."

Ross still resisted the idea. "I don't want you two implicated. I'm not running away, either. Maybe I can bring things out in court that would turn this community upside down."

Karen caught at his sleeve, trembling. "Ross, no! You've got to listen to Mac. It's the only way out now."

He made to move, wanting to urge her toward the convertible, away from the body at their feet. Pain jabbed through his knee. He had to halt.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

"Get him in the car," Mac said. "I'll take over."

He proceeded to drag Garth along the left side of the runabout while Ross held onto Karen and hobbled over to the convertible. The dead body was a sagging, inert weight. He leaned it against the fender and paused to catch his breath. Then he opened the door and bent over Garth again, struggling to pull him into the driver's seat.

At last he stood back from the runabout, clammy with sweat, breathing loud and hard, appraising Garth's propped-up position behind the wheel. The white suit was gritty with sand. He brushed the coat and trousers with quick, impatient strokes.

On the highway a truck came near. All three tensed at the sound of its muffled pulsation beyond the pines. Then it was gone. But it had served as a catalyst transforming indecision into swift action.

Mac walked over to the convertible.

"I'm going to drive back to the highway now. Keep close behind me. We'll drive without lights."

"What's your plan?"

"There's a pretty bad curve west of here. Just follow me and pick me up later. We'll have plenty to talk about, but not now. If anybody comes along, pull off the road and make like heavy neckers."

Ross looked at him from the convertible, watching him rub his forefinger under the lower edge of his eye patch. "Damn it, Mac—it's all wrong——"

"Quit arguing, Nichols. I told you we'd have plenty to talk about later. Be ready to pick me up, Karen."

They watched him go back to the runabout. He leaned across Garth to start the engine. Then he sat down on Garth's left and pushed at the dead man and put the car into gear. They waited while the runabout started slowly back to the highway.

"It's all wrong," Ross muttered. "It won't work."

Silently Karen put the convertible into gear.

Ahead of them Mac drove within ten yards of the highway. The road was empty in either direction, but he listened intently for the sound of an approaching vehicle. Only the faint stirring of the birds in the trees came to them. He pushed Garth into position behind the wheel, raised his hand in a signal to the convertible, and then steered the runabout onto the highway.

There was still no traffic in sight.

As the curve quickly loomed up ahead, they watched the black-nosed car head toward the banked shoulder. Mac leaned out from the runabout, ready to jump clear before it left the concrete. The front wheels dipped sickeningly in a jagged break in the road. He made to jump, but seemed fastened to the car. They saw him look down frantically, as though cursing the sight distortion caused by his missing eye. Evidently the door handle was caught in his shirt. He tore at it, ripping the shirt free, trying to leap clear.

It was too late.

The car was already in the air, turning over on him, as though pushed toward him by the weight of the dead man behind the wheel.

THE crowded room emptied in noisy rivulets into the echoing corridors of the courthouse and then poured in a slow, viscid stream into the street. The air inside the packed courtroom had been thick and sultry during the inquest. Outside, the heat had the aggressive malevolence of a roaring blast furnace. The curiosity-mongers straggled down the courthouse steps, coagulating in casual little groups on the sidewalk, waiting for the various principals to come outside.

Ross could see them through the plate-glass doors, fanning themselves with limp hands, trying vainly to stir their own immediate breezes in the windless heat.

"It was this way last August," said Karen. "They came from everywhere, just like today."

When Ross opened the door for her, she stepped outside, tall, slender, and proud. They descended the steps together, slowly, easily, as though unaware of the watchful appraisal accorded every movement they made. He steeled himself against the curious, wondering eyes until they came to a cleared area on the thronged sidewalk.

"So that's that," he said. "The perfect inquest." A middle-aged couple came near, guilelessly inquisitive and expectant, like children approaching strange animals behind bars. He kept silent until they were out of earshot. "A perfect ending, too. Garth apparently gives MacFarland a lift on the highway. Then they wind up plunging off the road. Fatally, of course." He nodded bitterly. "It couldn't have ended up better for all concerned."

Karen put her hand on his arm. "Ross, don't. It's over now. It's the way Mac wanted it to be."

"I can't help what MacFarland wanted. I'm still guilty. I still have to live with myself."

A murmurous stir of interest traveled the crowded sidewalk.

Karen turned, looking back toward the courthouse steps. Her father had come outside with Pollard. His hair shone like gleaming silver in the sun before he put on his new panama. He merited special attention from the onlookers. As coroner, he had presided at the inquest. She watched him say a last word to Pollard before making his way to his sedan.

"There goes Dad," she said. "Let's leave now, darling. It's really over now."

"Is it?"

She urged him unobtrusively along the sidewalk toward the convertible at the corner. "I'm glad Dad didn't keep you long on the witness stand."

"So am I. I'm still not a very good liar."

"Ross, don't. There's no need to hurt yourself."

"Mac wouldn't like it?"

"I didn't say that. I was thinking of him, but I wasn't going to say that."

"Do you think I'm not thinking about him?" Ross demanded savagely. "Do you think he hasn't been in my mind ever since it happened? It's his life I have on my conscience—not Garth's!"

In the car constrained silence sat between them, invisible yet ponderable, like a third passenger, barring all communication.

Karen remained silent until they stopped outside the bungalow. It looked abandoned, bereft. Nina was still in the hospital. Julian had been at the courthouse, covering the inquest. Buzzie's tricycle lay on its side on the lawn.

"Try to rest, darling. I'll call you later."

"All right."

Ross made to open the door and get out without another word.

A bee veered near him with a vibrant humming. Then Karen leaned forward and clasped her arms about his neck, bringing his head down to kiss him. Her lips were warm and tremulous as they brushed his mouth. She kissed him with unexpected passion, clinging to him. Tears shone in her eyes when she drew away, but her mouth was smiling.

"That's for my own special providence," she said. "That's for saving you for me."

After she had driven away, he still stood at the gate, rubbing his toe across the winding trails left by the garden snails on the sidewalk. The heat of the day had baked the damp, shining spore into delicate silver tracery. He noted absently how the garden had suffered from Julian's indifferent gardening for the past week. Then he went up the path and let himself into the house.

Crossing the entrance hall into the living room, he stopped short, looking past a robin balanced pertly on the window sill, listening to the loneliness in the house close about him. The silence of loneliness had its own sound, urgent, demanding, sardonic, like unfriendly whispering. He had heard it often during his childhood. He had thought he would never hear it again. But now Mac was gone. His friend was dead, and the loneliness was back, ruthless, virulent, darting about him in little gusts of hostile snickering.

A numbing sense of frustration seeped through him in a slow, cold, bitter corrosion. MacFarland had made a bad bargain for him. It was too late for him to confess the truth, to give himself up and reveal the deception even Pollard had accepted without question. He had kept silent, and his very silence implicated Karen. She would be indictable as an accessory if he attempted to tell the truth. He had to let the lie continue.

At the same time he knew he would always be haunted by the recurring nightmare of Garth dead and Mac mutely accusing. He had come to claim justice for his brother. He had brought death to his friend.

The thought wheeled him around, scaring the robin from the

sill. He had to get away. He couldn't stay. He moved quickly to the telephone and dialed the railroad station. The nervous telegraph key filtered over the noisy connection.

"What time does the next train stop for passengers?"

"Whassat?" A thin, asthmatic voice snuffled irritably over the wire. "Whereat you wanna go?"

"It doesn't matter. When's the next train?"

The telegraph key fidgeted in the background. Its tattoo sounded like fingernails drumming nervously on a table top while the station agent muttered and snuffled. The Chicago limited was scheduled to stop in sixteen minutes to pick up special freight.

"All right," Ross said. "Thanks very much."

Before he left the house he scribbled a hurried note.

Sorry, Julie, but I have to leave. I'll get in touch with you later about my things. Your bike's at the depot.

Leaving the folded paper leaning against the telephone, he walked back through the house to the kitchen. The heat outside enveloped him in a stifling embrace. He felt as though he had to push his way back to the garage for Julian's bicycle.

On the road the heat became unbearable each time he cycled out of the shadows of the overhanging trees into unshaded areas of pavement. His knee began to burn and twitch with pain. He made no attempt to slacken his speed.

At the station the anonymous face under the green eyeshade looked up with weary querulousness behind the ticket window. He bought his ticket and arranged to have the bicycle held for Julian and then went outside to the platform.

No one would question his flight. To accuse him of Brown's murder was to accuse the coroner's daughter. Pollard had to look elsewhere for a suspect. Perhaps, in the end, Slop Slasher would be the scapegoat.

At last the train emerged from the distant trees, moving in a cloud of steam and smoke along the gleaming tracks.

The coach he entered had a close, musty smell. It was half empty. Heads lolled listlessly against the scuffed green seats. At the end of the car a child whimpered fretfully. He found an empty seat midway down the coach and quietly sat down, looking out at the station agent on the platform. "Booorrrtt!" The train lurched forward tentatively, without much power, preparing to gather momentum.

He leaned back, closing his eyes. Behind his lowered lids his mind darted back and forth, listening to the noises in the coach, remotely annoyed by the crying child, aware of a window rattling and someone softly whistling and still someone else loudly sucking teeth. Then his mind was suddenly alert and still, arrested by the sound of an automobile horn blowing in familiar cadence.

When he opened his eyes, the convertible was skidding to a stop on the cinders outside the depot. He watched Karen jump down from the car and run swiftly across the platform, running toward the moving train. His arm shot up and pulled down the shade. Then he sat rigid in his seat, feeling the train gaining speed, listening to the clack-clack-clack of the wheels on the uneven roadbed, feeling the noise transmitted through every nerve like a darting needle.

He had botched everything, completely, irrevocably. Chuck was still guilty. Mac was dead. Karen was burdened with his guilt for two deaths. He had blundered from error to error.

When he let up the shade again, the tawny crops of planted fields glided past his window. An endless conveyor belt of telegraph and light poles kept pace with the train's forward movement. The wheels clattered under him with growing rapidity. At the end of the coach the whimpering had become angry, petulant sobbing. The sound gnawed at his self-control. He stood up and made his way up the aisle, balancing himself against the swaying movement of the train, heading for the smoking car. He opened the door and went into the vestibule. The clattering wheels crashed in thunderous staccato against the rails. He crossed between the accordion-pleated vesti-

bule between the coaches and stepped over the jolting floor of the locked couplers and opened the door to the adjoining coach.

". . . no," he said. "No, I can't let you."

Karen smiled wearily at him, leaning against the inner door, still exhausted by her headlong dash across the station platform. "You've already let me."

"You can't," he said. "I haven't the right!"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"I can't let you tie yourself to a——"

Her hand touched his mouth, stopping his words. "Ross, don't. Stop blaming yourself."

"But don't you see——"

"I see much more than you do, darling. I decided not to go home after I left you. When I drove back, I found your note to Julie. I found something else too. The mailman had just come and gone." She brought her hand from behind her back. "A letter for you. From Mac." The unopened letter shook in her hand with the vibration of the speeding train. "In a way, I'm not surprised. I found him writing at the motel Sunday night, you know. He dropped this in the mailbox outside before we went looking for you."

Ross took the long, sealed envelope from her, looking at his name and address scrawled in Mac's bold, casual hand. Wordlessly he ripped it open with his thumbnail and then took out the closely written sheets folded three times over. The words seemed to shake on the paper. He found himself wondering how much the train's vibration was to blame.

Karen began to read beside him.

Ross:

This is a letter I'd hoped I'd never have to write. But we get pushed into corners we can't get out of. I guess this is the worst bind I've ever been in, and there's no real way out. I'll try to explain myself, but I can't expect you to accept what I have to say.

The truth is, pal, I was with Chuck the day Brown killed him. Maybe you've guessed it by now. I can think of times when I've given myself away in talking to you, so I know it's only a question of time before you catch up with me. Before you pass judgment, let me tell you what happened last August. After that maybe you'll understand why I've kept my lip buttoned all this time. If you don't understand, then it'll prove my original rationale, but it won't make me feel any better.

Two days before all this happened Chuck looked me up in Cincinnati. I'd been there about eight months, and like I told you, I was shackled up with a bim, but I was ready to move on. Chuck said he was driving back to the Coast and invited me along. First I said no, then that night the chick pulled her possessive act again, so I decided to pull up stakes. We left Cincy around 2 A.M. Nobody knew I was leaving, and nobody knew I was leaving with Chuck. He wanted to see some babe in Duluth on his way home, which explains that Wisconsin route.

I took the wheel for the first part of the night. Chuck slept until we stopped for breakfast in Gary. After that he spelled me off while I curled up on the back seat. I slept from South Chicago to the road between Greenridge and Lake Teresa. Then I was jerked out of sleep by some kind of bump. I could still feel the car moving. I caught Chuck's eye in the rear-view mirror. He said not to worry, he'd grazed a parked car, nothing serious. I lifted myself up and looked out the back window. A young guy was getting out of the car to see what damage had been done. I know now, from photos, he was Alex Fuller. He was still alive at that time.

I settled back again, stretched out on my side with a light blanket thrown over me from feet to neck, pulled over my face to keep out the light. I started to doze off almost immediately. I'd have been sound asleep in a couple of minutes if Chuck hadn't stopped the car. He mumbled something about

giving somebody a ride. I didn't pay much attention. You know Chuck—the kind of guy who could never pass anybody up on the road. I figured he'd stopped for some hitchhiker, but when we started again, I knew it wasn't any ordinary thumber.

It was a dame, the drugstore-cologne type, with a voice that spelled trouble. A babe that's always on the make has it, always in heat and yet like an iceberg when she wants to drive some poor sap out of his mind. She sounded high when she started talking to Chuck. I gathered she wasn't conscious of me in the back, and that made me think she might be carrying a load, even at that time of day and on a country road. But then I knew it was emotion, not liquor. She was hopping mad, like a kid ready to smash a favorite toy to spite some adult.

"Did you see him?" she said. "You see that dumb jerk?"

It turned out she was referring to the guy in the car Chuck had grazed. Her husband, she said. A jerk, she said. They'd had another fight, and she'd got out of the car and started on foot to see her family in Lake Teresa. She hadn't been worried about not getting picked up; she'd never had any trouble getting picked up.

I bet, I thought, wanting to see what she looked like, but for some reason I've never figured out deciding to stay low.

"Now he knows the truth," she said. "Anybody else would kill me for it. I know if I was a man I'd kill any girl who did what I've done to him. But not him. He's a gentleman. He's a jerk."

Chuck made no answer, just kept driving. I heard her say something about a vegetable stand and then she asked him for a cigarette. He told her to look in the glove compartment. It snapped open, and then she said, "What's this?" A gun, Chuck said, a German Luger he'd bought from somebody, and not to handle it on account of it was loaded. Then it happened. She told him to pull off the highway and stop the car. Right away,

from Chuck's response, I knew something was wrong, I knew she was holding the gun on him.

Chuck stopped where she told him to.

"Now get out your wallet," she said. "Pep it up, honey. I don't like men this morning. I might do something you'd be sorry for."

"You're crazy," Chuck said. "I'm on my way home to California. I'll need every cent I've got to make it to Monterey."

"Hand it over," she said. "I'm not as crazy as you think. I live in these parts, always have. You're a stranger passing through. It's my word against yours, honey. I could even shoot you and get away with it. I'd say you tried to rape me, and that would take care of you. Now get out that wallet."

By this time I knew I had to get into the act. I've met enough drunk dames and hysterical dames to recognize all the symptoms. This one wasn't drunk, and not hysterical. Just plain mean, a nasty little bitch who'd never been walloped. I pulled the cover down slow and easy from my face. I was lying with my head behind her. My legs, still covered, were behind Chuck. I caught her face in profile—pretty, spoiled rotten, soft little mouth, under a nest of tight red curls. She was wearing a white peasant-type blouse, half off her shoulders.

"Hurry it up," she said. "I'm not fooling. I always need dough with the kind of husband I've got. Don't make me any madder than I am already. I don't care what I do if I get sore enough."

"Including rape?" I said. "You mean folks around here would believe anybody ever had to rape you?"

She didn't lose her head. Her eyes swiveled to the side, taking me in. But she still kept Chuck covered. After the first moment of surprise she even smiled at me, honey-sweet, freckle-faced, like a kid.

"You too," she said. "You can let me have a bonus, One-eye."

"Either she's crazy," Chuck said, "or else she's drunk."

"No, she's not," I said. "She knows what she's doing. A girl has to make an extra buck now and then. This way she won't even get her skirt wrinkled or her lipstick mussed. Better do like she says, Chuck."

He reached for his breast pocket, and her attention was distracted for a moment. I grabbed for her wrist as her eyes glanced away from me. Then the ball started. She fought like a wildcat. My damn eye patch gave me some trouble. She spit full in my good eye and then squirmed and scratched at me. Chuck couldn't do a thing to help. Her blouse tore when I grabbed at her shoulder. Then I got hold of the gun and started pushing it out of harm's way. She tried to jerk away. The gun went off. She gave a little moan and then slumped back. Seconds later she was dead.

It was my fault, and yet it wasn't my fault. Her own finger had pulled the trigger. Chuck hadn't killed her, and I hadn't killed her, but as far as anybody else was concerned, we were guilty as hell.

The rest of it went fast. I persuaded Chuck we'd never get anybody to believe us, so we drove down the side road we were on, dumped her body in a little clearing, and then drove back to the highway. Two miles later we ran out of gas. By this time Chuck's nerves were jumping. I wasn't much better, but I told him to stay with the car while I went for gas. It seemed better than abandoning the car, and since nobody had seen me with him, we figured I'd be safe in getting a can of gas from the nearest filling station.

We pushed the car off the road, and then I started toward Lake Teresa, keeping off the road, ready to duck at a moment's notice. Half a mile later I ducked down low. A motorcycle cop went by. It was Wad Brown on highway patrol. Knowing the state Chuck was in, the sight of a cop worried me. Should I go on or head back to Chuck? Then my mind was made up for me. Two quick shots in the distance. My

first thought was Chuck. I dumped the can I was carrying and started running, not along the highway but through the fields.

When I came in sight of the car again, a crowd was already gathered. Christ knows where they'd come from, but cars were already pulled up on both sides of the highway. I flopped down in the nearby field, behind the cover of some sort of hedge, listening to the general hubbub and looking at Chuck lying dead on the ground. Then the guy from Greenridge drove up with the Barrow woman, and the fat was in the fire. Alex Fuller had just been found murdered beside his car, and here was Chuck's car with a long scratch on it that matched a new scratch on Fuller's car. The Barrow woman had seen Peggy Fuller drive past her stand with Chuck. Where was Peggy Fuller? Right away they started organizing search parties to look for her.

At that point I knew I had to get the hell out of there. They were all ripe for a lynching, even though they already had their victim. I knew the moment they found the Fuller girl my life wouldn't be worth peanuts if they grabbed me. Chuck was already dead, already blamed for Fuller's murder. I knew I ought to clear him, but I was damned if I'd let myself be a sacrificial goat, not with a trigger-happy cop like Brown on the scene.

When they started to spread out in twos and threes, I slipped away through the fields. I walked for miles until I came to another highway. There wasn't anything in the car to identify me. I'd left Cincy with the shirt on my back and my last week's pay in my pocket. I thumbed a lift from a trucker and rode all the way to Chicago. I got myself a job in Chicago and stayed there until you looked me up last month. Q.E.D. and stuff.

Why didn't I tell you the truth?

Ross, how the hell could I?

The instant I ran I had to bury the truth inside me. I wanted to get in touch with your mother and tell her Chuck wasn't guilty, but I could never manage it. After that, as time went by, I knew it was too late to see her and tell her what happened. Then you came along, and I couldn't tell you, either. I came along with you to see how much you'd find out, and I urged you to take that playhouse job in hopes it would keep you all tied up. But now I know you've got to know the truth. Whatever you think of me, I won't be here to know it. I'll be gone when you read this. You can go to Pollard if you like. Maybe I'll get picked up, maybe not.

Who killed Alex Fuller? I don't know. He was still alive when we drove past him that morning. His wife hadn't killed him, and we didn't do it. His wallet was found in Chuck's car. She must've snatched it from him before we picked her up.

That's all, pal. It's a hell of a way to call time on a friendship, except it's not the end as far as I'm concerned. Think what you like, do what you like, we'll always be buddies in my book. So long, pal. Mac.

The vestibule floor rocked and jolted under their feet.

Karen took the letter from him with strange gentleness.

"It—it doesn't surprise me," she said slowly. "When I went to see Mac at the motel Sunday night, I wanted to talk to him. I'd gone through my *Gazette* clippings during the day. On the front page there was the usual weather-report roundup, something I'd just noticed casually before. In Cincinnati last August twenty-seventh there was a heavy rainstorm, and yet Mac had referred to the sunny day he'd spent while your brother was being killed. It didn't mean anything to me until Sunday night, when you mentioned Mac had called Peggy Fuller a freckle-faced little tramp. How could he know she had freckles? They weren't really noticeable, and no mention of them was made in the *Gazette*. Had somebody

here told him about her freckles? Or did he know that detail because he'd actually seen her that day? I wanted to talk to Mac about both things, but somehow he directed the talk away from himself. By then, of course, it was all in his letter. . . ."

The belt line of fence posts and light poles flashed past in a painful blur.

"I didn't know," Ross muttered. "I didn't guess."

The swaying train jolted Karen against him.

"Darling, it's over now. We can never prove the truth to anyone, but at least the two of us know your brother wasn't guilty. Now your mother will know it—and Nina and Julian, too, I hope."

"Of course. We'll let them know. But I still feel guilty about Mac—and there's your father—"

"You have Mac's letter, haven't you? You know he wouldn't hold you responsible for his death. And I've made my choice between you and Dad. . . ." She seized his arms, shaking him. "We're all that matters now—us—just the two of us! Wherever you go—whatever you do—"

When he took her in his arms, her old smile appeared, first lighting her eyes, then belatedly tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You might kiss me," she murmured.

All her strength seemed to flow into him. A momentary splendor fused them into one while the driving wheels echoed resoundingly the beat of his pulse. Guilt still lay within him, but for the crime of unfulfilled responsibility. There were still the Gershowitzes, the *Restricted* signs, the Negro on the station platform. There was still his friendship with Nina and Julian, the lakeside lot they had given him.

"We're not running away," Karen said suddenly. "We'll be back."

"Yes," he said, feeling the vestibule floor vibrating beneath them. "We'll be back."



FOR MORE THAN
a hundred years
readers have been
enjoying detective
stories; and for twenty-five years they have
found the best detective stories in the
Crime Club. Specializing in mystery and
detective fiction, the Crime Club has occu-
pied a position unique in the field.

On its list are names pre-eminent in the
craft, the tops of both England and Amer-
ica. In addition to these justly famous
writers the Crime Club, according to
Howard Haycraft, "has provided a hear-
ing for many new authors who might not
otherwise have been published, including
some of the best and most original talents
in the field today."

Four times a month, forty-eight times a
year, the Crime Club gunman points the
way to a new book of high entertainment
value. The partial list of authors of our
Crime Club Selections justifies such a
claim.

Margery Allingham	Kathleen Moore Knight
George Bagby	Jean Leslie
Manning Coles	Philip MacDonald
Leslie Charteris	D. B. Olsen
Frederick C. Davis	Eliot Reed
Doris Miles Disney	Margaret Scherf
Theodora DuBois	Mabel Seeley
Ruth Fenisong	John Sherwood
Dolores Hitchens	Aaron Marc Stein
Selwyn Jepson	John Stephen Strange
Rufus King	Arthur W. Upfield

THE CRIME CLUB

PUBLISHED BY DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
PUBLISHERS OF THE
Thorndike-Barnhart
Comprehensive Desk Dictionary

Printed in the U.S.A.



CHARACTER AND ATMOSPHERE



SOME LIKE THEM TOUGH



CHASE AND ADVENTURE



DAMSEL IN DISTRESS



HUMOR AND HOMICIDE



SOMETHING SPECIAL



FAVORITE SLEUTH



THE CRIME CLUB CELEBRATES ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY

CRIME CLUB GUIDE to the best in mystery and detective stories. Check the above symbols for your own preference when choosing one of the—

RECENT CRIME CLUB SELECTIONS

JOHN STEPHEN STRANGE. LET THE DEAD PAST. It was hard for Judge Bardoley to watch the prosecution of Valentina Arum Pound Abbott who was accused of murdering her first husband 17 years ago. And it almost killed him to relive his violent passion for this French enchantress, and to realize that the final decision rested not with the jury but with him. \$2.50

VERONICA PARKER JOHNS. MURDER BY THE DAY. Webster Flagg, a most respectable gentleman's gentleman was employed by an art connoisseur—Mr. Rutherford—who was inordinately afraid of fire. When Mr. Rutherford was found burned to a crisp in his fire-proofed chair, Webster suspected foul play, amassed some unrelated facts, and discovered that he was playing not with fire, but with murder. \$2.50

ARTHUR W. UPFIELD. MURDER MUST WAIT. A case of Obvious Neglect brought Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte to Mitford to find five stolen babies and a murderer. He trailed the clue back to an eery legend of the Bushmen, and almost lost his life because he realized that stolen children had priority and—murder must wait. \$2.50

FREDERICK C. DAVIS. DRAG THE DARK. The simultaneous disappearance of George Goodlee's "DeVecchio" diamond and Goodlee's daughter, pointed to the smooth work of the dubious Jay Millard. The elimination of one private eye brought Luke Speare and Schy Cole to a frantic chase in the night across snow-choked New York. \$2.50